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allegiances and relations [one]

Hey, everyone, we're back for book two. I can't believe how fast book one finished!? Well, I sincerely hope this one brings just as much thrill and adventure as the previous. Once again, I thank you for reading!

MAJOR EVENTS

Both Clans

>> It's been four moons since book one.

COLDCLAN

Leader - Mudstar; *male, 57 moons, mate is Mosspelt, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw. (3 lives.)*

Deputy - Redflight; *male, 58 moons, brother of Riverdew.*

Medicine Cat - Sunstorm; *female, 17 moons, daughter of Cloudmask and Berrystep, sister is Skyleap.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - Fishpaw; *female, 8 moons, brother is Stonepaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar.*

Warriors -

>> Berrystep; *female, 48 moons, mate was Cloudmask, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap, sister is Mosspelt.*

>> Sandfall; *female, 31 moons, mate of Sootleg, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

>> Sootleg; *male, 37 moons, mate of Sandfall, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

>> Owlfoot; *male, 22 moons, brother of Mousecloud, mate of Magpiefur.*

>> Webfall; *male, 28 moons, mate of Mousecloud, adoptive father to Mistheart, sons are Robinpaw and Heronpaw.*

>> Lakeheart*; male, 47 moons, mate of Silvernose, brother of Creekwillow, daughter is Rosepaw, son is Echopaw.*

>> Creekwillow*; female, 47 moons, sister of Lakeheart, mentor to Heronpaw.*

>> Silvernose; *female, 37 moons, mate is Lakeheart, daughter is Roseflower, son is Echopad.*

>> Mistheart; *female, 18 moons, unknown family, adoptive father is Webfall, mate is Tallnose.*

>> Rowanwhisker; *male, 15 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Spidertail and Tallnose, mate is Roseflower.*

>> Stagfoot; *male, 49 moons, mate is Fawngaze, sons are Crowkit and Frogkit, mentor to Stonepaw.*

>> Spidertail; *male, 15 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Rowanwhisker and Tallnose.*

>> Tallnose; *male, 15 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Spidertail and Rowanwhisker, mate is Mistheart, mentor to Robinpaw.*

>> Echopad; *male, 12 moons, sister is Roseflower, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart.*

>> Roseflower; *female, 12 moons, brother is Echopad, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart, mate is Rowanwhisker.*

>> Mosspelt; *female, 48 moons, mate is Mudstar, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw, sister is Berrystep.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

>> Mousecloud; *female, 22 moons, expecting two kits, mate of Webfall, sister of Owlfoot, sons are Heronpaw and Robinpaw.*

>> Fawngaze; *female, 28 moons, sons are Frogkit and Crowkit, mate is Stagfoot.*

>> Skyleap; *female, 17 moons, daughter of Cloudmask and Berrystep, sister is Sunstorm, daughters are Mothkit and Batkit, son is Antkit, adoptive mother to Icekit.*

>> Magpiefur; *female, 18 moons, daughter of Riverdew and Clearwhisker who now belong to HeatClan, daughters are Milkkit and Minnowkit, mate of Owlfoot.*

Kits -

>> Frogkit; *male, 5 moons, brother is Crowkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot.*

>> Crowkit; *male, 5 moons, brother is Frogkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot.*

>> Milkkit; *female, 4 moons, sister is Minnowkit, parents are Owlfoot and Magpiefur.*

>> Minnowkit; *female, 4 moons, sister is Milkkit, parents are Owlfoot and Magpiefur.*

>> Icekit; *male, 5 moons, father is Gorseface, adoptive mother is Skyleap.*

>> Antkit; *male, 4 moons, sisters are Mothkit and Batkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Mothkit; *female, 4 moons, sister is Batkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Batkit; *female, 4 moons, sister is Mothkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

Apprentices -

>> Robinpaw; *male, 7 moons, brother is Heronpaw, parents are Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Tallnose.*

> > Heronpaw; *male, 7 moons, brother is Robinpaw, parents are Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Creekwillow.*

> > Stonepaw; *male, 8 moons, sister is Fishpaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar, mentor is Stagfoot.*

Elders -

> > Shadeshell; *male, 87 moons, brother of Smokepelt.*

> > Smokepelt; *male, 87 moons, brother of Shadeshell.*

> > Gorseface; *male, 37 moons, son is Icekit, early retirement because of damaged hind legs.*

HEATCLAN

Leader - > > Cloudstar; *male, 52 moons, mate was Berrystep, mate is Jaypelt, son is Pinebelly, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap.*

Deputy - > > Coldfrost; *male, 48 moons, mate of Dovefeather (deceased), daughter is Beeface.*

Medicine Cat - > > Marshfoot; *male, 19 moons, brother is Sootsplash, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, mate was Skyleap, daughters are Batkit and Mothkit, son is Antkit.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - > > Ivypaw; *female, 13 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Reedfang.*

Warriors -

> > Goldheart; *male, 57 moons, mate of Beechpelt, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash, mentor of Breezepaw.*

> > Beechpelt; *female, 46 moons, mate of Goldheart, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash.*

> > Rabbitnose; *female, 45 moons, mate of Mintstep, son is Appletree, daughter is Cherrythorn.*

>> Mintstep; *male, 58 moons, mate of Rabbitnose, son is Appletree, daughter is Cherrythorn.*

>> Bearleap; *male, 58 moons, brother of Briartail.*

>> Nettlepelt; *male, 34 moons, mate of Swallowfeather, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

>> Vinepuddle; *male, 50 moons.*

>> Dustfire; *male, 38 moons, mate of Mapleheart, daughter is Breezepaw, son is Sagepaw.*

>> Grassflower*; female, 48 moons, daughter is Ashflower, son is Wolfclaw.*

>> Sootsplash; *male, 19 moons, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, brother is Marshfoot, mentor to Sagepaw.*

>> Swallowfeather; *female, 31 moons, mate of Nettlepelt, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

>> Beeface; *female, 18 moons, father is Coldfrost, mother was Dovefeather (deceased.)*

>> Riverdew; *male, 59 moons, mate of Clearwhisker, daughter is Magpiefur, brother of Redflight, ex-ColdClan member.*

>> Wolfclaw; *male, 17 moons, mother is Grassflower, sister is Ashflower, mate is Cherrythorn.*

>> Ashflower; *female, 17 moons, mother is Grassflower, brother is Wolfclaw.*

>> *Mapleheart; female, 32 moons, mate of Dustfire, daughter is Breezepaw, son is Sagepaw.*

>> Jaypelt*; female, 44 moons, mate of Cloudstar, son is Pinebelly.*

>> Reedfang; *female, 13 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Ivypaw.*

>> Cherrythorn; *female, 13 moons, parents are Mintstep and Rabbitnose, brother is Appletree, mate is Wolfclaw.*

>> Appletree*; male, 13 moons, parents are Mintstep and Rabbitnose, sister is Cherrythorn.*

>> Pinebelly; *male, 12 moons, parents are Cloudmask and Jaypelt.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

>> Briartail; *female, 57 moons, sister of Bearleap, kits are Stripekit, Daisykit and Tigerkit, mate unknown.*

>> Clearwhisker; *female, 56 moons, mate of Riverdew, daughter is Magpiefur, ex-ColdClan member, sons are Ferretkit and Loudkit.*

Kits -

>> Stripekit; *female, 5 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerkit, sister is Daisykit.*

>> Daisykit; *female, 5 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerkit, sister is Stripekit.*

>> Tigerkit*; male, 5 moons, mother is Briartail, sisters are Daisykit and Stripekit.*

>> Ferretkit; *male, 3 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Loudkit.*

>> Loudkit; *male, 3 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Ferretkit.*

Apprentices

>> Breezepaw; *female, 11 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, brother is Sagepaw, mentor is Goldheart.*

>> Sagepaw; *male, 11 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, sister is Breezepaw, mentor is Sootsplash.*

Elders -

Twigjaw; *female, 87 moons, mother of Grassflower.*

ROGUES/LONERS/KITTYPETS

>> Rustfire; *male, 60 moons, ColdClan cat turned kittypet.*

(c) of the names to me, idea comes from Erin Hunter's work.

1. Skyleap

"Batkit... Don't you dare! Antkit, look out!"

The jet black kitten had her paw raised behind her brother's mahogany brown pelt with a sly look on her face. Skyleap recognised that look - she'd seen it on her own sister's face many a time when they had been kits! Surprised, little Antkit dodged out the way, letting Batkit go flying into the mud that her brother had been sat next to. Skyleap glanced down at Mothkit, who sat in the identical position her mother was in. Gracefully, the pretty silver kit's eyes met her mother's, and she rolled them slightly; Mothkit's pelt did not have a speck of dirt on it.

Striding forward and attempting to look angry, Skyleap picked up Batkit by the scruff of her neck, the tomboy letting out a grunt of annoyance.

"I just cleaned you, and now look at you!" Skyleap moaned through a mass of Batkit's fur. She put the kit down at the entrance to the queen's den, and ushered her inside.

"Sorry, Skyleap." Batkit looked at the floor.

Icekit skittered over to Batkit's side, failing to stop and so collided with her, sending her flying. Once again, Batkit's fiery side came through, and Skyleap saw herself reflected in her daughter.

"Watch it, Icekit!" She hissed, her little paws swiping at the grey tom.

"It was your fault, Batkit, you got in my way!" Icekit responded, however Batkit was having none of it and jumped on him, the two of them rolling around on the moss beds.

Skyleap decided to intervene. "Stop that, Batkit. You need to be cleaned up for Echopaw and Rosepaw's ceremony. You don't want to miss watching them become fully fledged warriors, do you?" Her

sparkling blue eyes glared at Batkit's pale green ones in a questioning manner.

As if realizing what she would miss if she didn't get a move on, Batkit squirmed with delight and ran over to her mother. "Hurry up, hurry up!" She groaned. Icekit, Antkit and Mothkit sat patiently together, talking about adventures they hoped they would have when they became warriors.

Webfall appeared in the entrance, obviously searching for Mousecloud, who was expecting another litter of kits. The tom had always been rude to Skyleap, but today he was particularly cruel. He swiped Mothkit out of his way as he strode around the den, the kit letting out a terrified squeal as she flew into her adopted brother Icekit and her blood brother Antkit. Mothkit was not one to sit idly by and watch, and she charged after Webfall. "Hey, you! What did you do that for, you mousebrained fool!" Her voice tumbling out as a tiny squeak.

Spinning round angrily, the tom gave a hiss of annoyance. "You were in my way, you half-clan piece of foxdung!"

Surprised by Mothkit's sudden outburst and angered by Webfall's comment, Skyleap left Batkit and strode over to the two cats.

"Mothkit, go and sit with your siblings." She said in a commanding voice. The lithe kit puffed her chest, but did as she was told.

Skyleap stood between the huddled group of kits and the slightly larger tom, her sharp eyes glaring into Webfall's. "Leave my kits alone. They've never done anything wrong to you, and neither have I. Now get out of the queen's den, before I fetch Mudstar." Her voice was slow but harsh, and Webfall seemed to get the idea. He turned on his tail, but threw a hateful look back at them as he left.

Obviously confused, Antkit stepped forward. "Skyleap, what does it mean to be half-clan?" The thin tom questioned, his head tilted slightly.

Skyleap hardly wanted to answer that question. Of course her kits knew of their father in HeatClan, but they didn't really understand

what having a father truly meant. They'd seen other kits playing with their father's and hadn't understood the concept of a father's role, but then who could blame them? They were only four moons old.

Thankfully, she didn't have time to answer, as there was a loud call from outside. It was Mudstar calling a clan meeting, his deep voice shrouding the clan with a commanding respect.

When she left the den followed by her kits, the HeatClan medicine cat apprentice Ivypaw sat nervously at the base of the high rock. By her side was her escort, clearly to protect the apprentice from any cats that tried to attack. Skyleap recognised it as Reedfang, a vaguely new warrior of HeatClan who happened to be Ivypaw's sister. However, the rather large she-cat was no less capable as a warrior, even though she was only young. Compared to her sister, she looked like a fully grown adult.

As the clan began to sit down, Mudstar prepared to speak. Skyleap noticed that her beloved clan clearly wasn't going to be welcoming to the HeatClan cats - the look on their faces radiated anger. She guessed they were still not over the battle that occurred four moons ago. *Four moons ago was different,* she thought to herself, glancing once more down at Mothkit, Antkit and Batkit. *I didn't have these precious kits then.*

Sunstorm's friendly face and bright, ginger body appeared by Ivypaw's side. She spotted her sister with her kits near the queen's den, and flicked her tail in acknowledgement. Redflight hushed the clan, and Mudstar spoke.

"Cats of ColdClan, I thank you for being patient. I was hoping to conduct Rosepaw and Echopaw's ceremony, but another matter has arisen. To you both, I hope you understand, and if I get chance towards the end of this gathering, then the ceremony will go forward." Rosepaw and Echopaw didn't seem to be too bothered, although their mother looked twitchy from her place behind them.

"Ivypaw has something she needs to tell you." Redflight and Mudstar exchanged a glance that only a few cats noticed, Skyleap being one of them.

"Can't it wait till the gathering!? It's only half a moon away!" The impatient voice of Webfall sounded from behind her, and it made Skyleap's tail curl in anger from what had happened with her kits.

Mudstar looked like he was going to respond, but Ivypaw appeared to have had a sudden urge of confidence and spoke for herself. "It certainly cannot!" Her claws flexed on the rocks she was on, the she-cat puffing her chest a little.

"Well tell us then, we haven't got all day!" Murmurs of agreement from the crowd.

In despair, Ivypaw glanced back at her sister. Reedfang gave her a nod of encouragement, though she herself seemed to have tensed after Webfall's unwelcoming attitude had shown.

Continuing, she tried to look bold again, though her dark fur stood on end along the back of her neck. "Yes-Yesterday morning, a patrol went out, and.. and they found Foxstar's body." She took a breath to compose herself. "It appeared that he had disappeared in the middle of the night. His wounds are too horrible to describe in front of kits..."

Reedfang was apparently bored of her sister taking forever to get to the point, so she stood up and called out loudly to the clan. "Foxstar was murdered, and we'd like to know who by!"

2. Sunstorm

"Are you suggesting a ColdClan cat did it!?"

The sudden uproar from the clan made Sunstorm cower away from the masses. Mudstar looked flustered as he tried to calm them, and the usually level-headed Redflight was about a mouse-length away from Reedfang's face, naming every curse word Sunstorm had ever heard. Right now, she knew Larkwing would have stopped the nonsense. But Sunstorm was not Larkwing; she did not have her confidence, her manner or her knowledge.

From the sky above, Sunstorm saw a drop of water fall in front of her. Another one followed, but slightly to the right. As the cats began to notice too, they finally started to quieten down.

"This is a sign from StarClan!" Called out Berrystep, her head turned to the sky and her eyes partly shut to keep out the falling rain.

Suddenly, as if Berrystep's words were being listened to, it was like the skies were ripped open, and rain fell like stars to the ground.

"Berrystep is right. StarClan want us to think logically about this. This meeting is dismissed!" Shouted Mudstar in an angry tone. "I want all my senior warriors, plus Redflight and Sunstorm, in my den... *now*."

With his tail held high, he left his high-rock and strutted away from the rather confused cats. Webfall and Silvernose guided Ivypaw and Reedfang away, though both ColdClan warriors looked like they could murder the two HeatClan cats if they weren't careful. Sunstorm hoped they both wouldn't be brash.

Pausing for a moment, Sunstorm took a minute to look at her clan. She found herself reminiscing about the past, and everything that had happened to her in the last few moons. Life was different now, to when she was an apprentice. Everything had changed and if Sunstorm were brutally honest, she'd give anything to go back to

the way things were. Letting the rain wash her thoughts away, she followed the warriors into Mudstar's den: this consisted of Berrystep, Lakeheart, Creekwillow, Stagfoot and Mosspelt, and of course Redflight and Mudstar himself.

Comfortably, she sat herself between her mother and her friend Stagfoot -- he had been in the clan long enough to be seen as one of the most loyal warriors, and Sunstorm had a lot of respect for him.

As if on cue, Stagfoot, level-headed as ever, spoke first. "This is a serious accusation, Mudstar. We must be careful how we tread." The other warriors glanced at each other, the silence in the pause like a dead cat's heartbeat. An agitated Mudstar let out a look of despair to his closest confidants.

"I know. I just don't see any member of ColdClan being capable of murder. Especially Foxstar -- I know we didn't exactly get on, but he was a respectable leader." Murmurs of agreement rippled through the den, and Sunstorm took the moment to remember Foxstar. The fire coloured tom had truly been a good leader; he had never let his clan go hungry or let a threat hurt them. However, Foxstar had always been mislead by power, blinded by a craving Sunstorm had seen in no other. Considering that fact, she wondered if someone had wanted *his* power... That would be a likely explanation. The first cat that came to mind was her own father. Was he the source of this incident? Part of her wanted to believe that it was just some rogue, but her head was telling her that all the indicators pointed to Cloudmask.. well, he'd be Cloudstar now, she guessed.

Berrystep flicked her tail, signalling that she wanted to speak. Mudstar gave a small nod, his chocolate brown body exhaling heavily. "We mustn't let our anger cloud our judgement. Whoever did this will be brought to face the consequences in time. For now, we need to think rationally about this."

"Perhaps a visit to HeatClan itself is in order?" Questioned Lakeheart, sending a look to each other member of the small council.

Nodding in agreement, Mudstar's ears pricked. "Yes! Good idea, Lakeheart; Berrystep, you're certainly right." His features were

lighter now, and much more relieved. "Tomorrow, I shall go. Redflight and Berrystep, you shall accompany me as my advisers. Sunstorm, you shall come so we can show them that we mean them no harm."

More advising. More waiting. Sunstorm was tired. Tired, confused, and missing Larkwing's good advice. She had known as an apprentice what she was getting into as medicine cat, and yet she felt so young.. Young and unprepared and alone. Skyleap was understandably busy with her kits, whom were a breath of fresh air with their comic ways when she got to see them, however she missed the days when they had been young and free -- yet also more vulnerable. Loneliness led to Sunstorm being filled with doubt about herself, but there was something inside her, quietly fighting the darkness.

She was the last to leave the leader's den, and it was then that she spotted Spidertail and felt her heart rise to her throat, gagging her momentarily. The light tabby was sat alone in the sun, cleaning his paws thoroughly.

"Long time, friend." Making her way over to him, she dipped her head, partly out of respect but mostly so she didn't have to meet his hard gaze.

A little surprised, Spidertail looked up. "Sunstorm, I--I didn't expect to see you right now. Well, I did. We're in the same clan... But after all *that*...I'm babbling, aren't I?"

Letting out a short giggle, Sunstorm sat down in front of her old friend. "I've missed your talkative ways." A moment of silence held between the two, before both of them tried to speak at the same time.

"Ah, I'm sorry.. Please, you first." Spidertail said firmly, nodding his head to her.

"Thank you." Grimacing, the orange tabby wrapped her tail around her body. "I, uh, haven't been avoiding you. But you know how it is. I'm the medicine cat now.. With responsibility comes expectations."

Nodding in agreement, Spidertail pricked his own ears at her words. "I understand, Sunstorm -- I'm sorry if I seem to have been avoiding *you*. I suppose life gets in the way of a lot of things."

This conversation had meant to cheer Sunstorm up, but she had begun to feel worst. It was true, the past few moons had been rough, but she felt selfish now. To her, it seemed that she had abandoned all her relationships, leaving them to rot like mouldy prey. Never had she stopped caring about those around her. Being medicine cat meant she was meant to care *more*. But there was always something working against her, keeping her from spending time with her friends and family. Light trickling through the leaves of the tree above her, Sunstorm bent her head to the ground, slightly ashamed.

"I miss the old days." She stated simply, not meeting Spidertail's eyes.

"As do I."

There it was. The moment of recognition for their feelings. Though silent, the romantic moment between them drifted around, attempting to gain access to each of their hearts. Could either cat shut it out any longer? For Sunstorm, she knew that if she didn't keep her heart under lock and key, the world around her would crumble into nothingness. Everything she would have worked for would be for nothing.

So she stood up. Her legs wobbled beneath her as emotion rushed around her body. She couldn't let it show. Heart racing, she gave one last look at Spidertail. His face said it all: slightly upset, though his eyes were completely understand, he gave her a firm yet half-hearted smile.

"I'll see you around, yeah?" His voice was gentle, which made her stomach writhe with guilt even more.

Sunstorm turned, though she could feel the tears building in the corner of her eyes. "Yeah." She replied, walking away. With work to do and a murder to solve, she had to get moving.

3. Skyleap

With the sunset rising over the mountain behind them, the entrance to the queen's den was illuminated and it made Skyleap's eyes flicker open. As she shifted her body, she had almost forgot that there were kits tucked up next to her, and with a gentle pur, she pulled the four of them closer using her tail. Sunstorm had told her what Mudstar had said, and there was this heavy *thing* weighing down in her belly. She guessed it could only be worry for her sister. Sunstorm had not seemed herself recently, and it worried Skyleap to no end.

"Skyleap?" A tiny voice croaked up from inside the warmth of her grey pelt.

Two beady eyes appeared, and she realised it had been Icekit. Hushing him by letting the tip of her tail dance across his head, she whispered down to him. "What is it, my dear?"

Clearly, the kit had had enough rest, and untangled himself from his siblings' grasps. He moved swiftly, and claimed the spot between Skyleap's paws. With a chuckle, she bent down and began to clean his head, her warm tongue rasping over him.

"Why does my father not want to see me?"

Freezing for a second, Skyleap knew she had to choose her words carefully. There was no escaping this question. "Well," she began softly, continuing her licking as if nothing had happened. "*I* think he's scared." Gorseface's abandonment had had a hard effect on little Icekit.

In confusion, the kit cocked his head at Skyleap. "Scared? But I'm a kit! I'm not scary, not like those mountain lions.." He replied, his eyes wandering to the entrance as he thought of Gorseface.

"Not scared of you, my love, but of the thought of being a father." She knew more than one cat that that applied to. "He loves you

really, he just finds it difficult to express it, especially after everything that happened to him. And both me and your siblings love you. So don't be sad now, young one, you have your whole life ahead of you!" Gently, she nudged Icekit to his feet, indicating that she was done.

Steadily, the kit turned to look up at her with a grin. "Thank you, Skyleap."

With a firm but kind nod in response, the she-cat stood up, gently picking off the three kits that had hooked themselves to her side. One by one they yawned and stretched, beginning to wake up in the sunlight that streamed in. Antkit's mahogany colouring was the first to be skittering around the den, the tom already wide awake. Before long, the boisterous Batkit was tumbling around alongside him, her fur as dark as the night springing from one end of the den to the other. Mothkit was more elegant in her manner. Sitting back on her hind-legs, she began to lick her paw, her already impeccable silver tabby pelt shining a little more.

Magpiefur, another queen and good friend of Skyleap's stirred in the corner. Two shapes appeared from behind her, joining in with the fun and games of the morning. Milkkit and her pale tan pelt trotted over to Mothkit's side, and the two began gossiping quietly with each other. The shy but curious Minnowkit collided head on with Batkit, before shaking herself off and chasing after a mossball. It felt good to be a queen sitting among all the new life. Skyleap felt as though she'd done her clan a great favour by bringing the beautiful kits before her into the world.

"Can you believe it?" A gentle voice interrupted her thoughts, causing her head to snap around and face the she-cat. It was only Magpiefur. "Can you believe that Foxstar was murdered?" She asked again, clearly pushing for an answer.

Twitching her ears to indicate that she was thinking, Skyleap held a short silence between the two she-cats. If there was one thing everyone in clan knew about Magpiefur, it was that she was a lover of gossip. Knowing that she would have to tread carefully, the grey queen responded simply with, "Yes, I can believe it. By who, however, now that is a mystery." Hoping that it would satisfy

Magpiefur's questions, Skyleap turned back to watching her kits.

To no avail, however. "But don't you think it's strange? Your father leaves our clan, finds himself suddenly as deputy to Foxstar... and possibly wants more? I mean, I'm sure I would do the same. Anyone would!"

With a hiss, Skyleap let her fiery side show. "My father is not a murderer!" By StarClan, why was she defending the tom who left her family for another one? The tom who broke her mother's heart? What was said was said; there was no taking it back now. "I'm sorry." She mumbled quietly, not quite able to meet the other queen's eyes. "I guess I'm still tender about his departure."

Shocked, Magpiefur gave a little nod, but seemed to have got the idea that this topic was sensitive. Their conversation was stopped by a voice calling from the entrance of the den. It was Fishpaw, the gentle cat blinking as her eyes grew accustomed to the dark. Dipping her head, she moved towards them. "Greetings! Mudstar is leaving soon to go to visit HeatClan now. Sunstorm asked me to fetch you, Skyleap -- she wanted to speak with you before she left. I'm not sure what about, but Mudstar wants to be there by sunhigh."

With a smile, Skyleap pressed her nose against Fishpaw's. "Thank you," she spoke kindly, her voice softer and her previous anger ebbing from her as she spoke. "I'll be there shortly. Antkit, Mothkit, Batkit, Icekit, stay with Magpiefur. She's in charge, behave for her!"

Following the medicine cat apprentice out of the den, Skyleap realised what a beautiful day it was. A golden ball of sun sat high in the sky, and there were no clouds in sight. Cerulean was all she saw behind the summit of the mountain that loomed behind their plateau.

Sunstorm stood away from the congregation of cats as Skyleap made her way over. When the two sister's gazes met, there was a spark of something indescribable. Their relationship had had its ups and downs, but the one constant thing throughout it all had been their sistership. Rubbing her head against her sister's chest, Skyleap purred in greeting.

"Try not to get killed by a HeatClan savage," Skyleap chuckled, her neck vertebrae clicking as he brought it back up to its original position. Grinning, Sunstorm laughed in response, her sparkling eyes lit up by the joy.

Her tone twisted for a minute, the invisible force writhing on the floor before the happiness changed to sincerity. "Want me to speak to Marshfoot? Tell him how you and the kits are doing?"

Skyleap shrugged, not really sure how to respond. He was no father to her kits. Did he really deserve to know? "If he asks," She responded simply. "Sunstorm... what if it was our father who killed Foxstar? By StarClan, what if we're not only the daughter of a traitor, but of a murderer too!?" She felt quite dizzy with the thought, a sick feeling laying heavily in her stomach.

The ever calm Sunstorm pressed against her sister. "He does not define us, Skyleap. You proved that you were loyal to ColdClan when you chose us over going to live in HeatClan with Marshfoot, and my, you've shown your dedication so many times before that. We can't let our father's actions affect us."

Sighing, silence descended on the two as they shared each other's warmth for a moment longer. Mudstar's voice was the one to snap them from their tranquility. "Lets get going," he said, beckoning to Sunstorm with his tail.

"You'd better go," Skyleap said with a sniff.

Stepping away from her sister, Sunstorm offered her a lick on the nose. "Don't worry, yeah? Everything works out to be okay in the end. I promise."

4. Sunstorm

The day was cold, far colder than she had expected. Pale blue and cloudless, the sky stared down at the group with a crisp gaze. There was some sunshine, but it was harsh, not warm. Sticking to the back of the convoy, Sunstorm took her time at picking a route as they went down the mountain. A flicker of her stare glanced upwards, and she noticed two sparrows racing each other above her head. With a short smile, she knew they were approaching the beginning of the forest that divided ColdClan and HeatClan.

It was the layout of the part of the world they lived in that truly intrigued Sunstorm, and always had. StarClan had gifted her own clan a plateau on the mountain, sheltered by rocky crags either side. Their source of water came from a stream that ran through. On the other paw, HeatClan resided in the barren plain below the mountain. It wasn't a desert as such, but there was no better way of describing the bare, dry land they somehow managed to survive in. It fascinated the ginger she-cat that these cats were hardy enough to withstand everything they did. When HeatClan wasn't trying to kill her clanmates or accuse them of being murderers, she did greatly respect them.

Steadily, the sharp incline of the woodland between the two clans began to level out. Mudstar's supple, spry body slowed down at the front of the group, and Sunstorm could feel the tension that washed over the group like a wave. "Ok, we're almost there. Let me do the talking, and don't get into a fight with anyone! There aren't enough of us -- we'll be as much use as a dead fox."

There was an awkward silence as Mudstar spoke of the 'dead fox', and it was clear he had realised what he had said, as his eyes fell to the ground uncomfortably. "I, uh, didn't say that."

Mosspelt, Mudstar's mate, pushed passed him gracefully. "Good job, fuzz-brain." She snorted, a smirk on her face as she walked past a crestfallen Mudstar. The group pushed on, following the confident warrior, with their leader taking up the rear position to guide his

clan members.

They hadn't even reached the border when they smelt a new scent. About six warriors appeared from almost nowhere, taking Sunstorm by surprise , so much so that she leapt toward Redflight for protection. The older deputy's eyes were a little wide, even for a seasoned warrior, but Sunstorm was nonetheless grateful for the protection his thick red fur gave.

A massive warrior was the first to speak. His size was awe-inspiring; Sunstorm would be terrified to be in a battle against him. She knew that Redflight was a larger than average tom, but this HeatClan cat was like something she'd never seen before. He was completely grey except for his frightening, over-bearing gaze, which almost glowed with his orange eyes.

"I am Bearleap, the leader of this patrol. If you continue on your path, you will be trespassing on HeatClan territory," the aptly named cat took that moment to step forward menacingly. "That is something I would advise *against*."

Packed tightly together, the ColdClan cats raised their heads defiantly towards the enemies. Mudstar's courage always amazed Sunstorm, and he stepped out in front of the group. His apparent calmness was also quite shocking. After all, there was a murderer on the loose, and HeatClan seemed to want to blame ColdClan for it!

"You know who I am, Bearleap. We come here on formal business. I wish to speak to Cloudmask about the murder of Foxstar."

Tilting his head, the brute of a cat glanced at the other members of his patrol. "That's Cloudstar to you now. He made the journey to StarCave last moonhigh. We will take you to him."

Sunstorm's orange ears flicked forward. So StarClan had accepted her father as the new leader of HeatClan. *Wow*, she thought, *our ancestors work in funny ways.*

As the ColdClan array was guided towards the camp, Sunstorm couldn't help but feel like a prisoner. They had been surrounded,

huddled together like a bunch of kittypets, and marched onwards. Nerves on high, she knew she would have to hold her guard. As they moved, she found herself being taken into the heart of a circle of thicket. Sharp thorns were the protection for the HeatClan cats, and it also hid their camp incredibly well. She'd only ever been there once before, but she could hardly remember it. It did not fail to impress her once again.

In the centre of the circle was a craggy rock, jutting out from the ground at a diagonal angle. There was a multitude of different cats sitting around it, though none looked truly comfortable. These poor HeatClan cats were likely living on edge after what had happened to Foxstar. Her attention shifted quickly to someone who needed no introduction to Sunstorm. With a cool glare she matched her father's surprised gaze. Oh, how much did she want to lash out at him? He was a traitor, and even a medicine cat's forgiveness had to end somewhere.

"ColdClan..." Cloudstar began, his voice shockingly sounded relieved to see them. Getting to his feet, he bounced down from the crag to touch noses with Mudstar, who hesitantly responded with a respectful tail flick. "I thought you might come."

Nodding, the brown tom squinted a little at the new leader. It was clear that Cloudstar had yet to earn Mudstar's trust. The problem with her father was that he was so unpredictable, and Mudstar was intelligent enough to know this. "Yes, we came. It is vital that we speak with you, sooner rather than later."

"Of course," he responded, spinning on his claws to face the opposite direction. "This is a matter to be discussed privately. Come." As the group began to follow Cloudstar, barked an order back. "Not all of you. Just Mudstar and Sunstorm."

Glancing at her leader, Sunstorm anxiously stepped forward. They shared a look before continuing on, into a hole in the ground behind the rock. They found themselves underground in a wide cave, the floor covered in soft dry leaves brought back from the forest. At the back of the cave sat two shadowy figures, eyes glistening like StarClan's pelt.

"I appointed Coldfrost as my deputy." Cloudstar commented bluntly, as the shadows stepped into the light. Not only was Cloudstar joined by Coldfrost, but also by his side was Marshfoot. A little taken aback to see the medicine cat, Sunstorm's own gaze was focused on the black and white cat, although the tom couldn't seem to make her eyes.

"So, Cloudstar, what is your opinion?" Mudstar stated, to the point as always. "Who do *you* think killed Foxstar? And how are you sure it was a cat?"

Marshfoot interrupted before Cloudstar could speak. "It was a cat alright. The marks made were so distinct. He was.. slit through the throat with unsheathed claws." The cat was, in a way, not entirely there. Judging by the look of emptiness on his face, Marshfoot was clearly still in shock. Sunstorm wanted to feel sorry for him, but all she could think of when she looked at him was the little kits growing up without their father. It made her bitter because she knew how it felt to have a father leave.

"There's more," Cloudstar added with a short sigh. "On the day of his death, a message meant for me was given to Foxstar when he was out on patrol. Those who were with him say it was by a rogue, one whom he had never seen before, and they never gave a name. I spoke to Goldheart who joined him on the patrol, and he states that when the patrol questioned Foxstar, he said that it was a message for me. He didn't say what it was about, but instead of telling me... my only guess is, he went to discover it for himself. Wh-why do I get the feeling that Foxstar was just in the wrong place at the wrong time? I think whoever killed Foxstar simply got the wrong cat."

What Mudstar and Sunstorm were hearing was thought-provoking, though neither could get the thought out of their mind that it was all a hoax from Cloudstar to get him into a leadership position. They knew his antics well, and they wouldn't put it past him. His next comment, however, would push their opinions like a monster hitting a deer on a Thunderpath.

"In truth, it is your help I need. I'm terrified that it will be my life next that will be taken. I don't know who killed Foxstar. I don't know if it was a ColdClan cat, a HeatClan cat, or a rogue or

kittypet. What I do know is that this cat has terrified my entire clan, and they are in turmoil. They trust nobody, not even each other. Tensions run higher than ever. ColdClan, I'm begging you. Investigate the death further, for your own sakes if not mine."

Pausing, Cloudstar stared deep into his daughter's eyes. Uncomfortable with the gaze of a traitor burning so deep into her, Sunstorm twitched a little, trying to look away from him. "I want to protect the people I love, but I can't do that alone."

Well, thought Sunstorm. Protecting the people he loved? *That's a first.*

= = = =

5. Skyleap

"He had to agree to it, Skyleap! He had to!"

The heated words between sisters were flying through the air, anger pounding in each of their hearts. Standing on the edge of the creek, the rushing water babbled in the background churned away carelessly, not bothered about the argument happening on its banks.

"No he didn't. That tom is a traitor, not just to our family but to the entire clan! Why should we be investigating the death of their leader? This has nothing to do with us!" Skyleap's sparkling eyes flashed with lightning bolts of torment, for it was not an easy thought to swallow to think that they were going to try and protect the very man who left his family to fend for themselves. And she was clearly angry at Sunstorm, though there was little that the medicine cat could have said in the moment.

"But Skyleap," Sunstorm began, the golden cat gazing at her sister with pleading eyes. "Mudstar didn't agree to investigate it for Cloudstar, he did it for us! What if this cat strikes again, but closer to home? Whilst there is a killer on the loose, none of us is safe."

Flicking her tail moodily knowing she was losing this argument, Skyleap turned away from her sister, staring at her rippled reflection in the water. In truth, she knew Sunstorm was right. There wasn't just her to think about now and she needed to stop being so selfish. Feeling Sunstorm's warm breath on her neck, Skyleap relaxed a little and leaned into her fluffy chest. The sisters shared a moment of peaceful embrace.

"We should leave," the sister of the golden eyes murmured, burying her nose in the fur on top of Skyleap's head. "No doubt the kits are wondering where you've gotten to."

Walking side by side, the sisters noticed a small group of cats

gathered around Mudstar as they approached. Other members of the clan were clearly trying not to show their fear of the killer, and so were going about their daily business. The fresh-kill pile looked well stocked, and in the corner of the camp they could see Rowanwhisker delegating roles to the three eager apprentices stood by him. Beckoned over by the chocolate brown leader, Skyleap approached hesitantly for she was not sure if she could keep her temper in control after her previous outburst against Sunstorm.

Mudstar was mid sentence, and so the pair settled at the edge of the group. "So the only thing we have to go off is that kittypet or rogue that delivered the message to Foxstar. Goldheart said it was a she-cat, pale coloured with darker points, and the deepest green eyes he'd ever seen. Plus she was missing half her ear, so she should be recognisable. Do we know of any cats around here like that?"

The group, consisting of Redflight, Berrystep, Stagfoot and Mosspelt, all shook their heads. Sunstorm was the one to speak on behalf of them all. "The nearest twolegplace is uncountable tree-lengths away from here, on the other side of HeatClan land. They call it the Brightplace, because it is said to be lit up by the strangest lights on top of sticks all across the twoleg's camp."

"I've heard of it," Stagfoot interjected. "When I was a kittypet, I heard tales of huge twoleg camps like this so called 'Brightplace'. My twoleg lived alone and in the middle of nowhere, so I never got to see them, but from what I've heard from passing cats, it is a dangerous place full of twolegs, dogs and foxes."

The atmosphere turned black as the tomcat spoke of the dangers. Nobody wanted to speak of such a place. ColdClan was situated far enough from most twolegs, and they liked to keep it that way. None of them wanted to become crowfood for the twolegs!

"We don't even know if she came from the Brightplace." Redflight remarked, breaking the silence.

It was true, they had no idea who this cat was or where she had come from. But Skyleap couldn't get it out her mind that this could be their only chance of finding her. If she had been seen on HeatClan land, then it was more than likely she'd come from the

Brightplace. Though she was unsure about helping Cloudstar, she knew that she wanted to protect Batkit, Antkit, Mothkit and Icekit from any dangers that there could be out there.

"You have to go and try. If you find her, we've moved another step in the right direction of getting to the bottom of this."

Sunstorm's ears pricked towards her sister. "Don't you want to come, Skyleap? You're one of the best fighters I know, you'd be a great addition if we got into any trouble."

Shaking her head, the grey tabby let out a small mew of gratitude. "I can't, my kits need me here. But I hope, by StarClan, you have a safe journey."

There was a pause as the rest of the cats looked at each other. Mudstar let out a sigh, his brown fur heaving a little. "Then that's decided. We'll go to the Brightplace. But not all of you... I need some senior warriors to stay here and look after things. No, I'll take Stagfoot, Sunstorm, Mistheart and Spidertail. The five of us should be enough, we don't want to scare this cat away. We need to get all the information we can."

Skyleap frowned a little as she realised that Sunstorm and Spidertail would be travelling together. She knew how close the two were, and often worried that perhaps they had gotten *too* close. Though she could never imagine her sister breaking the medicine cat code on purpose, she knew that the forces of the heart played with a deeper fate.

"Redflight, you're in charge." Mudstar continued, flashing out orders like bolts of lightning. Though a gentle leader, he could be sharp when he needed to be. "Stagfoot, go and let the other warriors know they're coming with us. Make up some traveling herbs, Sunstorm."

As the group dispersed, Skyleap was left sat alone in the dust. Trailing her paw around the ground, she gave a small sigh of despair. She would have loved to have made such a journey, as her love of danger and adrenaline made her want to go on more adventures. Perhaps in future there would be time for that. Getting to her feet, she wandered back towards the nursery, where her

beautiful kits were there to greet her.

"Skyleap!" The four of them squeaked and ran into her, bumping against her chest. She let out a delighted purr, licking each of their heads individually.

"What's going on, Skyleap? We saw you outside with Mudstar." Asked Mothkit, her face curiously cocked to one side.

Nudging them back inside, Skyleap settled down in the den on some fresh moss bedding. "Well my dears, there is a place that is said to shine brighter than the sun. It is where twolegs dwell, along with dogs and even foxes! It is full of dangers around every corner." Her kits settled at her feet, eagerly looking up at her with their wide eyes. She continued her story, her tail flicking in happiness. "There are many kittypets and loners living there, and they're nothing like us clan cats. They don't have leaders, deputies, or even medicine cats! Sunstorm and the others are going there to find a certain cat who we think can give us some information about something."

"About Foxstar's death?" Icekit asked bluntly, the other kits nodding as he spoke.

"Uh, well, yes. How did you know about that?"

Slightly shameful, the pale kit hung his head. "We might have listened in when Ivypaw and Reedfang came. And also when Silvernose and Echopad were talking about it. We couldn't help it Skyleap, they were right outside the nursery!"

"You shouldn't be listening in to other cat's conversations." The she-cat remarked, though she wasn't really cross. The natural curiosity of kits always fascinated her. They always seemed to be wise beyond their years.

Glancing at each other, the four kits all chimed in at once with lilted voices. "Sorry, Skyleap."

"It's alright. Thank you for your apology. Now run into the den and find Frogkit, Crowkit and Fawngaze so we can all sit together for a sun-down story."

As the fluffballs ran further into the den, Skyleap turned her head and glanced over her shoulders. There was the group getting ready to leave, talking cheerily among themselves and making jokes. A pang of jealousy fell through her heart and she quickly turned away to distract herself from them. They had decided who was going, there was no point holding a grudge. This was their battle to fight, just as she had her own to fight back home.

6. Sunstorm

The posse of cats wandered out of the shelter of the camp, watched by their worrying clanmates. Tales of the Brightplace were often told to frighten kits to keep away from twolegs, and even though many of the more fearful cats were now adults, their worries were not for nothing. With so many predators all in one place, Sunstorm knew her group would have to be more careful than ever.

Bringing up the rear of the group alongside her friend Stagfoot, the young cat trod carefully on the crumbling rocks of the mountain. Though sure-footed, her fear of slipping was inevitable as she guessed that with one stumble, she could fall to her death. There had been a strange quiet descended on the group since they'd left, and she could only put it down to their fear. Mudstar led at the front, alone and independent, followed by Spidertail who was guiding Mistheart on the safest route. Pausing for a moment to catch her breath, Sunstorm laid eyes on Spidertail's lanky body and watched him momentarily as he assisted Mistheart to stop her from falling. His kindness made her warm a little inside, knowing that she was friends with someone so gentle.

With HeatClan land quickly coming into sight as the trees at the base of the mountain got more sparse, Mudstar began to slow down and allow his clanmates to catch up with him. The cats moved together in a small, tight formation as they approached the border, worried that a HeatClan attack could happen at any moment.

To their surprise, no attack came. Instead, a solemn cat appeared on his own, clearly meaning no harm to them. They still stopped at the edge of the border out of courtesy, though they could have easily overpowered the cat if they had wished.

"Mudstar." he said in recognition, with little emotion whatsoever.

"Mintstep," Mudstar responded. "We were just coming this way to-"

He was cut off by the large tom taking a step to the side, moving

away from blocking their path. "Cloudstar has decreed that any ColdClan cat can pass through our borders." Though Mintstep wasn't attacking them, Sunstorm could tell in his tone that he wasn't particularly happy about letting a group of strangers walk through his territory.

"Tell Cloudstar thank you from me, and also let him know that we are passing through to reach the Brightplace. We're investigating further for him."

Clearly no more words needed to be said, as with one final firm nod, the cat disappeared back towards the hidden thickets of the HeatClan den. With flat, dry ground ahead of them, the cats could make much better progress now.

Filing into one line, Sunstorm couldn't help but feel watched, as though round every thicket there was a HeatClan cat coughing up furballs over the fact they had been allowed to walk freely through their land. It made her smirk a little. Those hot-blooded, quick-tempered fools should be thankful to them -- they were the ones doing the work for them.

Trudging on in near silence, save from the occasional reminder from Stagfoot to watch her step, the group make quick progress in their journey. They soon had left behind the plains of the HeatClan territory and there on the horizon like the rising sun sat the Brightplace. It was unlike anything Sunstorm had ever seen before, and her eyes widened in response as they drew to a halt. Tall, strange blocks protruded in the sky, their drab colourings making them look unnatural. Sunstorm wondered what the twolegs could use such massive rocks for. Even with some distance, she could hear the roar of the monsters, and it sounded like more than she'd ever seen in one place before. Even more strangely, what she'd originally passed off as birds flew over the skies and landed in the midst of the Brightplace, but did not flap their wings. Never had she seen something so odd, and her eyes darted around in a mad attempt to take it all in.

"Don't get too distracted," muttered Stagfoot from a little behind her. "You don't know what's lurking behind these corners."

Leaping up onto a fence, Mudstar still led the way, but the group moved as one unit to protect themselves... and each other. They were on the very outskirts of the Brightplace still, but they could now see bustling twolegs going about their business. Sunstorm watched, a little amused as they went in and out of what she guessed were their dens. One female twoleg rocked a smaller twoleg kit to sleep, whilst another was sat upon some weird, moving contraption that had two spinning circles underneath. Sunstorm's head swirled with the movement of the circles and she quickly became dizzy, digging her claws into the wood of the fence.

Leaping down to join the others, who had since moved to sit under the shade of a tree, Sunstorm had to drag her eyes away from the impressive sights of the Brightplace. She couldn't allow herself to get too drawn into a place like this -- she knew she'd hate the life of a kittypet, all innocent and adored by a twoleg. She rested next to Mudstar, who was rolling on his back exposing his glossy brown flank, glad of the rest after their journey.

"This place is so strange," commented Mistheart, who also appeared to be in awe of it. "I wonder if we should explore more?"

Mudstar shook his head in response as he sat back up, fiercely protective eyes scanning around him for danger. "Not whilst the sun is up. There are too many twolegs around."

"But just look at those --"

Mistheart's sentence was cut short by the sound of a shouting twoleg, repeating the same noise over and over. Instantly pricking their ears up, the cats sat upright out of surprise. Glancing around nervously, the clan cats subconsciously moved closer together, each one looking in a different direction. Exposed in the open grassy field they were in, Sunstorm could nearly hear the frightened heartbeats of her friends pounding out of their throats. It was a high-pitched, blood-curdling yowl from Spidertail that caused them to scatter like a paw wafting bees.

"*Dogs!*"

Sunstorm's first instinct was to run, her paws digging up dirt and

grass in a messy pile as she moved off from her position under the tree. The barking behind her only made her paws go faster, fear pumping around her body like it was in her blood. A snap behind her tail made her realise just how close one of the hounds was, for she could hear it's heavy panting and the clink of teeth as it tried to grab at her. Spinning on her heels and almost losing her footing from underneath her, she made a U-turn back in the direction of the tree.

Now she could see the others. The white shape of Mistheart, up a tree and trembling, clinging to the bough for her life. The large frame of Stagfoot, narrowly missing the dog's maw as he leapt onto the fence they had come from. Mudstar and Spidertail were having a face off of their own, taking it in turns to try and bat at the dog's muzzle. They looked to be in a losing battle, however, as Spidertail had to be knocked aside by Mudstar when the dog lunged forward. It instead knocked the leader backwards, and Mudstar lay limp on the floor in a mangled heap. Sunstorm had to hold herself back from running to his aid; he was likely losing a life.

The golden cat had no chance to pause as the dog had soon caught up with her again, the black and tan mutt yapping at her ankles. It was quickly joined by the second dog, who had grown bored playing with Mudstar's lifeless body and had raced after his friend to join the second chase of the afternoon. Ahead of her was the end of the grass and a brick wall that was taller than any she'd seen before lay dead ahead. There was no way she'd make it up the wall in one leap, and she couldn't afford to try and find another route. It was a dead end.

With nothing left to do but to stand firm and wait for the inevitable, the few moments Sunstorm had left gave her chance to pray to StarClan to save her soul. Glancing up to the skies, Sunstorm silently asked Larkwing to send her help. The ignorant pale clouds above moved on, appearing to have little care for the world below and the turmoil Sunstorm was facing.

That was, until a low flying dark shape passed over her head, interupting her view of the sky. Dropping down from the wall, it landed surprisingly neatly in front on all four paws, dividing the dogs from the she-cat stood trembling next to the wall. The body

had fur that was almost completely black, bar its tail that looked like it had been dipped into fluffy white clouds. A lithe, tall body with battlescars aplenty, Sunstorm's mouth dropped open at the fearless cat.

"Shove off, ye' dog scum!" He shouted at them with a strong accent, charging at them full on with claws lashing left and right. Out of pure surprise, the dogs backed away a little, confused as to where the other cat had come from. Once they'd realised that it was a cat, they began to advance again. Sunstorm would have loved to lunge forward and help out the stranger, but her legs stayed glued to the ground and her body didn't allow her to move. It didn't seem to matter much, however. The cat had utter control.

Darting through one of the dog's legs, he gave out a deep laugh as the mutt got himself into a muddle in an attempt to follow the cat. Instead of standing and waiting, the cat swiped its claws at the dog's rear, leaving painful scratches on his tail and hind legs. With a yelp, he scampered back towards his approaching owner. The other dog, now slightly more hesitant, circled the black tom. With a cocky raised brow, the cat pretended to dart one way, and then raced the other way leaving the dog in a dizzy mess. Once again the tom attacked, this time jumping onto the back of the dog and scratching his scruff. In an attempt to rid himself of the sharp pain, the dog threw the cat off and it landed expertly on its feet. With its tail between its legs, the dog made off back towards the twoleg shouting louder than a badger grunting at night.

"That's right, clear off, 'n don't be coming back any time soon, ye' mongrels!" Strutting around as the dog made off, the cat puffed his chest happily. His face, adorned with a long battlescar just above his eye, turned concern when he appeared to remember the reason he had attacked the dogs in the first place. "Ye' alright, pretty 'un?"

His concerned face put Sunstorm at ease a little, and she could feel her cheeks getting a little warm at being called 'pretty'. "I--I'm fine, thanks to you! Though I did think I was crowfood for a moment."

Her gaze moved away from her saviour to the body of Mudstar behind him, surrounded by her clanmates. She inhaled a small gasp, racing past the tom without a second thought. When she reached

Mudstar's side, she noticed he wasn't breathing. Nudging at him gently, she shook with fear.

A cough, a splutter, and the cat was sat up looking dazed. Thanking StarClan, the ColdClan cats pushed their noses against Mudstar for they were thankful he was alive.

"Ugh," he spoke groggily, his eyes swimming as he confirmed their fears. "Lost a life. What happened?"

"You saved me," Spidertail said, his eyes thankful. "And then we *all* were saved by this cat."

Turning to face him once more, the battered, tatty looking cat behind them gave a small mew of greeting.

"I'm glad yer' all safe." He nodded his head gently. "But what in name of earth and sky were yous doing out 'ere in the daytime? Yer' clearly not street cats, so where are yous from?"

Sunstorm saw that Mudstar was still a little out of things, so she spoke for them. "We're clancats, of ColdClan. We travelled across the HeatClan plain to get here. There's someone we're hoping to find; we think that the rogue we're looking for came from the Brightplace. And who are you? We owe you our lives."

"Brightplace? Oh, yous mean the city. Ye' clancats haven't the first idea, do yer'? I'm Herb, and I don't belong to no clan. Ain't got time for loyalties."

So they were dealing with a rogue cat. Usually, Sunstorm would have been terrified of such a cat. Any cat who did not fear a higher being made her shudder. She wondered how he could live without guidance from the stars? Or assistance from his friends? How did he know that when he was hunting, someone wasn't going to jump on him from behind? The innocent she-cat had so many questions.

Spidertail seemed to be ahead of her. "But doesn't it get lonely, not having a clan?" He questioned.

With a snort, the black cat sat down and began grooming behind his ear. "Just 'cause I don't 'av a clan, don't mean I'm lacking friends.

We're street cats, we make friends, we lose 'em, it's a circle of life you learn to live with. My lot are currently staying at the Scraps. Savvy street cats know not to be prowlin' in the daytimes, 'cause it's when the dangers come out to play. Here, clancats, I'll do yous a favour. Not like I already have for saving your life, but hey-ho. Anyways, come with me to the Scraps. There's food and shelter and company -- n' cats who may know the one yous are looking for."

Stagfoot moved over to Sunstorm's ear, whispering gently in it. "We can't afford to not go with him. Mudstar needs to rest."

Nodding in agreement, the black cat gave a little purr of satisfaction, before clambering up onto a fence. Beckoning with his tail to follow, Herb led the way with hurried steps, clearly worried about being out in the daytime. Mudstar was helped up by Stagfoot and Spidertail. It took Sunstorm a few heartbeats to catch up with Herb, but when she did, she finally got to ask him the question she had most been dying to ask.

"Hey, Herb, if you don't go out in the day, how did you know we were in trouble?"

Without turning round to face her, the tom plowed on over the tops of the twoleg dens. "I was in a dream," he began, with a voice that sounded like it was still trying to figure it out himself. "A pretty lil' thing came to me, with eyes as warm as my mother's and the most beautiful coloured pelt. She were the one who told me to go. I know it sounds strange, n' you don't have to believe me, but I tell ye', it's the truth."

But Sunstorm did believe him. She believed him with more conviction than she'd believed anything else before. Larkwing was watching over her. Her precious mentor still cared.

allegiances and relations [two]

MAJOR EVENTS

Both Clans

> > One moon has passed since the start of this book.

> > The gathering is postponed out of fear of the murderer.

COLDCLAN

Leader - Mudstar; *male, 58 moons, mate is Mosspelt, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw. (2 lives.)*

Deputy - Redflight; *male, 59 moons, brother of Riverdew.*

Medicine Cat - Sunstorm; *female, 18 moons, daughter of Cloudstar and Berrystep, sister is Skyleap.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - Fishpaw; *female, 9 moons, brother is Stonepaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar.*

Warriors -

> > Berrystep; *female, 49 moons, mate was Cloudmask, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap, sister is Mosspelt.*

> > Sandfall; *female, 32 moons, mate of Sootleg, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

> > Sootleg; *male, 38 moons, mate of Sandfall, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

> > Owlfoot; *male, 23 moons, brother of Mousecloud, mate of Magpiefur.*

> > Webfall; *male, 29 moons, mate of Mousecloud, adoptive father to*

Mistheart, sons are Robinpaw and Heronpaw.

> > Lakeheart*; male, 48 moons, mate of Silvernose, brother of Creekwillow, daughter is Roseflower, son is Echopad.*

> > Creekwillow*; female, 48 moons, sister of Lakeheart, mentor to Heronpaw.*

> > Silvernose; *female, 38 moons, mate is Lakeheart, daughter is Roseflower, son is Echopad.*

> > Mistheart; *female, 19 moons, unknown family, adoptive father is Webfall, mate is Tallnose.*

> > Rowanwhisker; *male, 16 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Spidertail and Tallnose, mate is Roseflower.*

> > Stagfoot; *male, 50 moons, mate is Fawngaze, sons are Crowkit and Frogkit, mentor to Stonepaw.*

> > Spidertail; *male, 16 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Rowanwhisker and Tallnose.*

> > Tallnose; *male, 16 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Spidertail and Rowanwhisker, mate is Mistheart, mentor to Robinpaw.*

> > Echopad; *male, 13 moons, sister is Roseflower, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart.*

> > Roseflower; *female, 13 moons, brother is Echopad, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart, mate is Rowanwhisker.*

> > Mosspelt; *female, 49 moons, mate is Mudstar, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw, sister is Berrystep.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

> > Mousecloud; *female, 23 moons, expecting two kits, mate of Webfall, sister of Owlfoot, sons are Heronpaw and Robinpaw.*

> > Fawngaze; *female, 29 moons, sons are Frogkit and Crowkit, mate*

is Stagfoot.

>> Skyleap; *female, 18 moons, daughter of Cloudstar and Berrystep, sister is Sunstorm, daughters are Mothkit and Batkit, son is Antkit, adoptive mother to Icekit.*

>> Magpiefur; *female, 19 moons, daughter of Riverdew and Clearwhisker who now belong to HeatClan, daughters are Milkkit and Minnowkit, mate of Owlfoot.*

Kits -

>> Frogkit; *male, 6 moons, brother is Crowkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot.*

>> Crowkit; *male, 6 moons, brother is Frogkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot.*

>> Milkkit; *female, 5 moons, sister is Minnowkit, parents are Owlfoot and Magpiefur.*

>> Minnowkit; *female, 5 moons, sister is Milkkit, parents are Owlfoot and Magpiefur.*

>> Icekit; *male, 6 moons, father is Gorseface, adoptive mother is Skyleap.*

>> Antkit; *male, 5 moons, sisters are Mothkit and Batkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Mothkit; *female, 5 moons, sister is Batkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Batkit; *female, 5 moons, sister is Mothkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

Apprentices -

>> Robinpaw; *male, 8 moons, brother is Heronpaw, parents are Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Tallnose.*

>> Heronpaw; *male, 8 moons, brother is Robinpaw, parents are*

Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Creekwillow.

>> Stonepaw; *male, 9 moons, sister is Fishpaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar, mentor is Stagfoot.*

Elders -

>> Shadeshell; *male, 88 moons, brother of Smokepelt.*

>> Smokepelt; *male, 88 moons, brother of Shadeshell.*

>> Gorseface; *male, 38 moons, son is Icekit, early retirement because of damaged hind legs.*

HEATCLAN

Leader - >> Cloudstar; *male, 53 moons, mate was Berrystep, mate is Jaypelt, son is Pinebelly, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap.*

Deputy - >> Coldfrost; *male, 49 moons, mate of Dovefeather (deceased), daughter is Beeface.*

Medicine Cat - >> Marshfoot; *male, 20 moons, brother is Sootsplash, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, mate was Skyleap, daughters are Batkit and Mothkit, son is Antkit.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - >> Ivypaw; *female, 14 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Reedfang.*

Warriors -

>> Goldheart; *male, 58 moons, mate of Beechpelt, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash, mentor of Breezepaw.*

>> Beechpelt; *female, 47 moons, mate of Goldheart, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash.*

>> Rabbitnose; *female, 46 moons, mate of Mintstep, son is Appletree, daughter is Cherrythorn.*

>> Mintstep; *male, 58 moons, mate of Rabbitnose, son is Appletree,*

daughter is Cherrythorn.

> > Bearleap; *male, 59 moons, brother of Briartail.*

> > Nettlepelt; *male, 35 moons, mate of Swallowfeather, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

> > Vinepuddle; *male, 51 moons.*

> > Dustfire; *male, 39 moons, mate of Mapleheart, daughter is Breezepaw, son is Sagepaw.*

> > Grassflower*; female, 49 moons, daughter is Ashflower, son is Wolfclaw.*

> > Sootsplash; *male, 20 moons, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, brother is Marshfoot, mentor to Sagepaw.*

> > Swallowfeather; *female, 32 moons, mate of Nettlepelt, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

> > Beeface; *female, 19 moons, father is Coldfrost, mother was Dovefeather (deceased.)*

> > Riverdew; *male, 60 moons, mate of Clearwhisker, daughter is Magpiefur, brother of Redflight, ex-ColdClan member.*

> > Wolfclaw; *male, 18 moons, mother is Grassflower, sister is Ashflower, mate is Cherrythorn.*

> > Ashflower; *female, 18 moons, mother is Grassflower, brother is Wolfclaw.*

> > *Mapleheart; female, 33 moons, mate of Dustfire, daughter is Breezepaw, son is Sagepaw.*

> > Jaypelt*; female, 45 moons, mate of Cloudstar, son is Pinebelly.*

> > Reedfang; *female, 14 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Ivypaw.*

> > Cherrythorn; *female, 14 moons, parents are Mintstep and*

Rabbitnose, brother is Appletree, mate is Wolfclaw.

>> Appletree*; male, 14 moons, parents are Mintstep and Rabbitnose, sister is Cherrythorn.*

>> Pinebelly; *male, 13 moons, parents are Cloudmask and Jaypelt.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

>> Briartail; *female, 58 moons, sister of Bearleap, kits are Stripekit, Daisykit and Tigerkit, mate unknown.*

>> Clearwhisker; *female, 57 moons, mate of Riverdew, daughter is Magpiefur, ex-ColdClan member, sons are Ferretkit and Loudkit.*

Kits -

>> Stripekit; *female, 6 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerkit, sister is Daisykit.*

>> Daisykit; *female, 6 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerkit, sister is Stripekit.*

>> Tigerkit*; male, 6 moons, mother is Briartail, sisters are Daisykit and Stripekit.*

>> Ferretkit; *male, 4 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Loudkit.*

>> Loudkit; *male, 4 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Ferretkit.*

Apprentices

>> Breezepaw; *female, 12 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, brother is Sagepaw, mentor is Goldheart.*

>> Sagepaw; *male, 12 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, sister is Breezepaw, mentor is Sootsplash.*

Elders -

Twigjaw; *female, 88 moons, mother of Grassflower.*

ROGUES/LONERS/KITTYPETS

>> Rustfire; *male, 61 moons, ColdClan cat turned kittypet.*

>> Herb; *male, unknown, street cat who lives at the Scraps.*

(c) of the names to me, idea comes from Erin Hunter's work.

7. Skyleap

The world seemed to be in slow motion as a butterfly hovered above her head, taking its time to flutter onto every lilac flower on the bush offering her shade. It would pause for a few seconds, as if considering its next move, before decisively moving on in a flurry of brown, blue and red. With little effort as the sun was going down, Skyleap's grey body lay droopy across the dirt floor. There was hardly any movement from the she-cat and one couldn't be blamed for thinking that she was dead, but when a fly got too close, she'd flick her tail as a reminder that she was very much aware of her surroundings.

When she finally opened her eyes to the first moments of streaming sunlight patterning the trees with a warm golden light across a striking blue backdrop, she fixated on the little moving figures she could see playing a little further away from her. The darkest coloured of her kits was in the centre of the others, covered in dust and camouflaging her with ground. As a sharp contrast, her sister sat nearby watching the rambunctious Batkit disapprovingly, her mottled colouring immaculately clean. Mothkit was all the vain parts of Skyleap on a whole new level. Icekit and Antkit were attempting to knock Batkit to the ground, but they were certainly struggling as their sister was one tough little kit.

Thoughts drifting to her sister, Skyleap flipped over onto her back to look at the sky framed by the creeping limbs of the trees above her. She traced their edges as though they were pathways that a crow could see as it flew high above their heads, and she wondered which route the Brightplace group had taken. Had they trekked the uncountable tree-lengths it took to go around the HeatClan border? Or perhaps they'd pleaded their way through. After all, they were doing this for Cloudstar.

Cloudstar... the name sat in her head like a great lake, suppressing her every effort to shake it like when she'd tried to run through the

shallows of the stream as a kit and been pushed to slow down by a invisible force keeping her from striding easily through. She still couldn't quite believe that her father was the leader of HeatClan; the animosity between the two clans had always been there. Their ancestors had gifted the enmity to them all, and they were still reeling in the aftermath of the wars that tore the original clans apart all those moons ago. Leaders since then had pushed the clans in different directions, their morals and ethics evolving under each cats' personality.

Speaking of leaders, Skyleap's attention was caught by the shadow of a figure leaping up to the leader's rock in the centre of camp. In all his scarlet glory, Redflight looked a little nervous standing in the stead of a cat she knew he respected so much.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey come to the leader's rock!" He called out, and like moths to a flame, her clanmates appeared. Fishpaw and her stubby little tail sat beneath the rock, seemingly proud of herself for her first venture without Sunstorm. The brothers Rowanwhisker and Tallnose sat next to each other with their heads held high, and Mosspelt hovered just a little behind them.

Skyleap herself rolled over effortlessly, bringing herself to her four paws in one smooth motion. With a short shake of her dappled pelt, she beckoned to her kits to come forward and sit with her. Tumbling towards her, the obviously excitable kittens dotted themselves around her in anticipation for the deputy's words.

"Quiet now!" She scolded under her breath, nudging Batkit and Icekit apart as one held on to the tail of the other. Nearby, Webfall glanced at her with a fiery glare. It made the fur on her neck bristle with anger, and she quickly diverted all her attention to Redflight.

He began with a deep breath, sucking it in as though it were his last. "Uh-- greetings, ColdClan. I have a couple of things I'd like to address today, whilst Mudstar is away. I hope you don't mind." Shifting his weight from one paw to the other, Skyleap offered the cat a nod of encouragement when their eyes met. The poor deputy was obviously nervous, more so than she'd ever seen him before.

"Myself and Mudstar discussed this before he left, and he-- we decided that it would be best to do this now, even though Mudstar is away. I'd like Frogkit, Crowkit and Icekit to step forward, please."

Taken by surprise, Icekit sat at the base of Skyleap's paws in shock, his small white body quivering a little. Bending to his ear level, she gently whispered in his ear. "*Go on, Icekit.*"

The kit ambled up slowly, behind the two other kits who seemed much more eager and excited. Skyleap silently wished that Icekit was a moon younger, because then he would have been apprenticed with her own kits. Still, she knew it was time for the young cat to train. He was mature for his age, and after everything he'd been through, she was proud.

"Frogkit, Crowkit and Icekit**,** you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Frogpaw, Crowpaw and Icepaw. For you, Frogpaw, your mentor will be Berrystep. Crowpaw, yours will be Owlfoot. As for you, young Icepaw, I will be your mentor. I hope we can pass down all we know to you, and you live up to the expectations of being a ColdClan warrior."

So Icekit would be trained by Redflight? Skyleap was happy with the choice. There was no cat with the same levels of dedication and respect as the big red tom. Together, they would make an unstoppable pair; Skyleap could feel it in her bones. He'd been her mentor too, and she didn't think she would be the cat she was today without him shaping her into a fully-fledged warrior. Berrystep and Owlfoot were good choices too. Her mother's seemingly endless levels of kindness and Owlfoot's intelligence beyond all others were incredibly commendable. The clan really was making progress towards rebuilding after the losses of the BearCave battle.

A short while later, in the midst of the afternoon, the clan was vibrant with varying coloured pelts as they were organising themselves. Redflight had instructed that cats had to go out together in groups of at least four, and so the bustle of clan was in

full swing when Skyleap finished eating a little sparrow from the fresh-kill pile. Watching the comings and goin

The she-cat couldn't help but feel like they were missing something in this whole murder business. For all the things Foxstar was, she knew he wasn't as mouse-brained as to get himself into some kind of trouble. He'd always been a sweet-talker, charming everyone with his warm-coated words. It was difficult for the young cat to believe that he hadn't put up a better fight; to lose all his lives meant the injuries had to have been horrific. How could a strong, healthy, large tom not have fought off an attacker?

An idea started to emerge in her head, rising to the surface like the froth on the edges of the ripples of water when she'd played in the stream in Newleaf. As far as she knew, nobody had been to the scene of the murder since its original discovery a few sunrises ago. What if there was incriminating evidence there, something to point them in the right direction? What if their only lead from the Brightplace fails to develop into anything substantial? What if the murderer returned to the place where they'd killed Foxstar? Questions racing through her mind, Skyleap stood up and was about to rush out of camp when she remembered something. Eyes flicking to the queen's den, she purposefully strode over to it, glancing round to check nobody was watching her.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she spotted a snoozing Mothkit surrounded by her siblings. The newly named Icepaw was whispering to Batkit and Antkit, and Skyleap could only guess he was telling them a story. When they saw their mother, they looked up and joyfully danced over to her.

"Skyleap, Skyleap!" Batkit squealed enthusiastically, bouncing round her paws.

The rest of the den was empty, and Skyleap toyed with the idea she'd created in her mind. Leaving her kits alone with a murderer on the loose was surely more dangerous than taking them with her, right? Especially when she didn't know if the killer was a ColdClan cat or not...

"Hello, my little ones." Her muzzle stroked the tops of their heads

warmly, and Mothkit slowly rose from her slumber to join them.

Icepaw rubbed against her chest. "What's going on, Skyleap? You seem on edge." He commented.

"I'm fine, Icepaw. I came to talk to you all about something else. Now listen, it could be dangerous, so I need you all to be on your best behaviour. And if you don't want to come, that's fine, I'll just have to hunt down Magpiefur to take care of you all..."

"What!? Where are we going!? An adventure!?" The usually quiet Antkit peered up at her with big green eyes.

"Something like that, I guess." Skyleap licked a raspy tongue over her son's head. "Do you want to come, then?"

Voices lilted and chiming in unison, the kits responded with an overwhelming 'yes'. Mothkit was the only one who seemed a little hesitant, but hated missing out when they all did things together, so gave a small shrug and sidled next to her mother. Now all they needed to do was to get them all out of there without too many questions being asked.

The strange mix of various size cats slunk out of the den warily, none of them daring to speak to one another. Even the vocal Batkit seemed to understand that they were trying to sneak out undetected, and held her sharp tongue even when clumsy Antkit ran into the back of her. They were so close to being out into the fir-tree forest when a familiar voice rang out to them.

"In a rush, Skyleap?" It was Sootleg, a tan with dark points tom and the father to the trio of brothers, Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose. His face was one of genuine concern, and she guessed it must have looked quite strange rushing her kits out of camp at such a rate.

She was about to speak when young Mothkit interrupted, stepping forward between the two adult cats.

"Hi, Sootleg," she said gently, her voice elegant and controlled. "Our mother was taking us to see the stream, can you believe!? We've

heard that the trout are so *big* at this time of year and we convinced her to show us!" Letting out a giggle, the she-cat acted so convincingly, batting her eyelids towards the older warrior without a second thought. The worry disappeared from the tom's sloping features.

"I see.." He replied, and there was a smile on his face where the frown had been. "The trout are massive! Be careful that they don't eat you!" Jokingly, he touched his nose to Mothkit's, who nudged back warmly. As he turned to walk away, he threw a comment over his shoulder. "Have fun with the fish, but remember what Redflight said -- no further than the stream!"

When he was out of sight, the small family circled around Mothkit with different looks on their faces. Batkit and Antkit were in a state of surprise that their sister could talk them out of the situation, whereas Icepaw had one eyebrow raised and Skyleap couldn't tell if it was disapprovingly or quite the opposite. Her own face was beaming bright. "That's my girl!" She said. "Now let's go, before we run into someone else who isn't so easily convinced by our intentions."

The usually quick journey was slowed by the kits trailing behind her, though to their credit, none of them moaned about how far they'd have to go. Icepaw brought up the rear, seemingly falling into his new role of protective apprentice well. None of them spoke, except to point out the occasional squirrel that Skyleap promised she would help them catch in the future. Right now, they had a mission, and it was important that they got there as soon as possible so they weren't missed back at home.

When they reached the place that Ivypaw had described, the posse of cats halted, apparently on edge. This was both figuratively and literally -- they had reached the border between the territories, divided by a rocky outcrop with a sheer drop.

"Is.. is that blood?" Antkit asked unnervingly, his eyes wandering across a vermilion trail staining the stone beneath their paws. Mothkit backed away slowly, eyes wide. Nobody spoke. Nobody wanted to answer little Antkit's question.

It was Icepaw that had the courage to follow the blood, which appeared to lead over the edge. Skyleap was close behind him, checking for anything that could give them a clue as to what happened on the point they stood on not too long ago. The pair were parallel to each other as they peered over.

"That's one fall," Icepaw said quietly, shuffling a little closer to Skyleap.

With the warmth of Icepaw pressing into her side, she suddenly regretted bringing her kits to the site of a murder. Mothkit stood way back, underneath the shelter of the canopy of the trees. Antkit was staring at the blood, trembling, and his black sister was simply stood, staring expectantly at Skyleap with an expressionless look on her face. *By StarClan, why did I think this was a good idea!?* She questioned inside her mind. She didn't deserve to be a mother to these kits. This had been so irresponsible. They wouldn't sleep for days now. And if the murderer had come back? Why, how mousebrained she'd been... making her way towards her kits, she was about to calm them when a voice pierced through the silence.

"What in StarClan's name are you doing here!?"

Author's Note

Hi guys! I'm back! I missed you all. Sorry about my long absence. I have exams at the minute but ColdClan offered a great escape from it all.

How'd you find this chapter? Who do you think has discovered Skyleap and her kits at the murder site? And what on earth is going to happen to Sunstorm? AHH! So many questions!

Happy reading! - TLF xx

8. Sunstorm

Getting to the so-called 'Scraps' had taken no time at all with Herb guiding the way, even though it was on the other edge of the Brightplace. The street cat (he'd made sure to firmly correct them every time they'd called him a rogue) had picked out the safest route for the group by keeping to the rooftops, his jet black scarred body always a few fox-lengths ahead of them as he scouted out ahead. As the cats had teetered on the edges of fences and leapt from the gaping canyons between the two-leg dens, they'd begun to catch the scents of more and more cats. It had been strange at first, a metallic smell mixed with the acrid stench of burning rubber, but with every step closer they latched on to the definitive cat scent.

Upon first glance, the Scraps was nothing more than a maze of strange metal squares compressed together. The group of cats steadily gazed up at the entrance, all bewildered as to what the purpose behind such a place was. Shooting a glance at Mistheart, the pair of she-cats shared a look of confusion, blue eyes matched with Sunstorm's warm green irises.

Leaping up on one of the squares, Herb threw back a knowing grin, beckoning them with his white-tipped tail. It was only when she was on top of the hunks of metal that it slowly formed in her mind as to what they were stood on, and one look at her clanmates told her they'd begun to figure it out too. ColdClan didn't get many monsters around, but she knew that at the edge of the valley bordering the HeatClan camp there were plenty of thunderpaths. Monsters had been described to her as alive, roaring things that chugged along after swallowing the two-legs whole. Sometimes they would spew their two-legs out, opening its pores for them to escape. It was one thing about two-legs she'd never been able to comprehend -- they seemed to use it as transportation, though why they didn't use their perfectly good legs, she'd never know. But here the monsters were, with the life knocked out of them, their bones crushed into a perfect cube. The morbid nature of it made Sunstorm

sway a little as she peered over the edge, nervously expecting one of them to purr to life and attack her ColdClan friends. They had placed their faith in this tom-cat, and under the light of StarClan, Sunstorm momentarily questioned if they'd been wrong to do so. Watching him descend into a nook in the side of the metal castle, Sunstorm took a deep breath before jumping down to join him.

"Wakey wakey, you pieces of dead meat!" Thoughts interrupted by the voice of Herb, the clan cats huddled together as he shouted into the darkness. They were beneath a single light that flickered occasionally, painting black shadows that crept across the ground towards their paws.

A yowl from the left, and suddenly, Herb was pinned to the floor. Defensively unsheathing their claws, Mudstar and his cats took a step forward ready to protect the black tom. Stagfoot hovered next to him, anxiously waiting for the go ahead to attack.

Surprisingly, Herb responded by giggling, knocking the flash of ginger and white off him without even taking a breath. "Easy, tiger," he laughed, springing to his feet in a flash. "S'only me."

"Oh!" The squeak of a she-cat's voice rang through the air. "It's okay guys, it's Herb! Aaaaand... some other cats? Ew, you guys don't smell like the city. No offence or anything."

Various glistening eyes revealed themselves in the darkness, emerging as though the dark was birthing them from her womb. One pair turned into three, and they moved towards the pelt of the she-cat warily, clinging to her like burrs.

"These are ColdClan cats, come to visit from the freelands. New friends, meet my band of brothers. And sister." He added, nudging the female affectionately. "This is Clementine," he gestured to the she-cat that had first attacked. She was young but pretty, and Sunstorm would place her at around 11 or 12 moons old. Unlike Sunstorm's striking ginger, she was much more pale, and had a white belly to match with it. Her fur was long and made her look more bulky than she likely was. Out of them all, she had the friendliest look on her face and seemed to be the least afraid of the newcomers.

"And Duncan," the black tom spoke again, laying his tail across the shoulders of a tall, beefy cat who could rival Stagfoot in size. The Siamese-looking pelt had dark chocolate points and they blurred into the lighter parts of his fur. "He never speaks, so don't go expecting to 'ave a nice chat with 'im anytime soon."

Herb was apparently about to speak again when one of the other toms cut in. "I can introduce myself, don't you think, Herb?" The black tom bent his head respectfully. With an air of authority about him, the male who had interrupted was definitely the eldest of them all. He was fat, too, and Sunstorm guessed that even she could easily outrun him in a race, leaving his grey pelt out in the dust. "My name is Invictus, and I'm the closest thing you'll get to a leader around here. So don't go trying any funny business now. I'm watching you!"

"You're not really though, are you Vic?" Scoffed Clementine, shaking her pelt nonchalantly. When she was done, she addressed the clan cats. "He's going blind, so don't let him freak you out."

There seemed to be only one cat left to be introduced, though he was hidden at the back blocked by the other street cats' bodies. Sunstorm raised her head a little in order to get a glimpse, and she made eye contact with green eyes; they weren't just any green but the sort you get in the first few days of spring as they force their way through the snowy roofs protecting the little buds. There was a judgemental harshness to them, and she found herself looking away, apparently flustered. Spidertail gave her an odd look from his place next to her.

"Y'can come out now, Trek. They ain't gonna' bite."

The tom shot a look towards Herb; Sunstorm guessed he wasn't worried about an attack. With his unsheathed claws and face like fire, this 'Trek' obviously didn't trust them. His Bengal-patterned coat was a rich, bright amber, like the kind you get when the trees are cut and bleed their sap.

"What are they doing here, Herb?" Trek questioned with a tilt of his head, his eyes never leaving Sunstorm.

"Wow. Whatta' way to treat ya' guests, Trek."

"Not my guests. Yours. I've heard that clan cats are nothing but trouble."

"They had a run-in with a dog. Got no clue how to survive out here."

"Let them die, then. They don't need us looking after them -- what are we, their mothers?"

"I swear Trek, sometimes I wanna' just rip your throat--"

"That's enough!" Invictus' voice was surprisingly commanding, and it boomed through the air making Sunstorm retract backwards towards the safety of Stagfoot.

"Look, if we're not welcome here, we'll leave. We don't want to cause any trouble..." Mudstar said diplomatically, bending his head respectfully at Invictus. The older elder ignored him, and instead swiped Trek around the ear. He attempted to do the same to Herb, but the black tom ducked and it missed by a margin. Clearly the elderly cat hadn't completely lost his fight. "Herb is right. These are our guests, and you will all treat them as such. Don't you kits have hunting and marking to do? Our patch won't stay ours with you two squabbling like a pair of baby birds. Get out of here!"

As if a fire had been set beneath them, Duncan and Trek dispersed, running in different directions. The patterned tom sent back a glare towards Sunstorm, who quickly looked away, not being able to bring her gaze to meet his. Clementine paused for a moment, scanning the cats one more time, before shrugging. "Nice to meet you all, anyway. See you when I get back!" The young cat leapt away into the night.

Mudstar, Spidertail, Stagfoot, Mistheart and Sunstorm were left with the remaining two street cats. The eldest let out a sigh. "Come on then. I'm meant to be on watch tonight, but no doubt you all have questions. Follow me."

Reluctantly following Invictus, they all made their way to the centre

of the strange maze of metal. This was the highest point in the whole maze; Sunstorm felt like she could almost touch the stars if she wanted to as they climbed higher. It made the ColdClan cats feel more at home. They were much better suited for climbing than for racing along flat ground. Settling in a circle at the top of the tower, the cats gazed out across the Brightplace, its lights glowing enthusiastically and its belly grumbling with the constant roar of monsters. Though there was noise, there was a strange peace to being up so high and being able to see so far. It reminded Sunstorm of the little ants she used to watch when her and Skyleap were kits; the grey she-cat had wanted to see how many they could squish, but Sunstorm had always preferred watching the ants go about their merry little lives without a care in the world for what happened. Their lives were so easy, and they were so loyal. From their birth to their death they were dedicated to the fetching and carrying for their queen. The only difference was being up so high now made her feel small, one tiny young she-cat in a tangled web of deceit, lies and love that was the world she knew.

Herb and Invictus sat next to each, the older of the two laying with his paws tucked neatly under him. The pair were poised and ready to answer questions.

"Why do you do everything at night?" Stagfoot was the first in there with a question.

"Darkness is your best friend, as a cat. Much easier to hide in the shadows at night. Don't understand why anyone would hunt in the day. Next?"

"Are you the only group of street cats?" Mistheart questioned.

"Were you even listening?" Invictus retorted, bemused. "We mark our patch -- our territory, if you will. There are plenty of other bands around here. Each one would snatch the Scraps from us in a heartbeat. Everybody wants to be a Scraps cat."

"Have you heard anything about a murderer from these parts?"

Sunstorm interjected, but instantly regretted it. Silence fell deafeningly on the group and all eyes turned to her. The Scraps cats

seemed confused more than anything, whereas her friends all looked at her with their brows raised. Someone had to say it, and it might as well be her.

"A murderer? What are ya' on about, kid?" Herb's eyes were half-worry, half-cautious, as though she herself went around slaughtering clan leaders everyday.

"Well, uh-- HeatClan, our neighbours... their clan leader was killed. His name is-- was Foxstar. And Cloudmask, who is now Cloudstar, you know how us clan cats change our names, well he believes that it was truly him the murderer was after. But we're worried that they could strike again. And those who saw the cat said that she wasn't a wild cat. But, uh, we thought she might be from here, and..."

She was clearly blabbing, and Mudstar got up to sit next to her. "What Sunstorm is trying to say is that we have our ears to the ground for rumours. We're keeping an open mind because some cats think it was Cloudstar, the new leader, who killed Foxstar. Honestly, we're just trying to get to the bottom of this. That's who we're really looking here for."

Invictus and Herb shared a look with each other, one that Sunstorm struggled to read. She pulled her bright orange chest in closer to her, feeling the chill of the night air but it combined with the heat from her flustered embarrassment.

"I've heard nothing of any killer cat. You, Herb?"

"Nope. Ain't heard nothin', but y'know, cats around here... they ain't all morally sound, like us lot. Take Trek, for example. He grew up with another band, more violent than ours; we don't attack on sight, but for them, whole thing is a game. Maybe one of them gone rogue?"

Sunstorm let out a sigh of defeat. Perhaps this hadn't been a good idea after all. They'd learnt nothing more than they had before, they had no new leads... and for all they knew, the cat could have struck again at home. Fears wandering to the little kits, she turned to Mudstar, hoping he'd have an idea of what to do next. The brown tom simply looked back at her, out of ideas himself.

"We're sorry if you had a wasted trip." Invictus spoke more gently to the let down cats.

Shaking his head, Stagfoot stood up and stretched his huge body. "Not wasted. We learned a lot. And got to meet you guys."

"Please, feel free to stay for the night. We'll show you where you can sleep. Mudstar, you look exhausted."

Sunstorm remembered only at that point that her leader had only recently just lost a life, and instantly came to his side, nudging him up ready to encourage him to rest. She gave a nod in the Scraps cats direction, acknowledging their offer gratefully.

Sunstorm awoke the next morning with her back pressed against shining metal, cooling her fur down with its blue-coloured shine. It took her a moment to remember where she was, the sand beneath her not quite feeling the same as the ground underfoot back at home. The Scraps felt smaller in the daytime, and less confusing, once she realised there was an obvious layout to it. The cats that had been hunting the night before had brought back a selection of food for her and her clanmates to eat; three juicy mice, a big blackbird and a thrush. Clementine, only a few moons younger than Sunstorm, boldly walked over to her with the blackbird in her mouth.

"Want to share?" She said, placing it at the she-cat's feet.

Nodding and smiling, Sunstorm settled down next to her to pick the meat off the bones. They ate in silence, only their stomachs making any noise with grumbles of content. Pelts pressed next to each other, Sunstorm thought it was nice to be sharing another cat's warmth.

"What's it like, in the wild?" Clementine spoke with wide hers, bearing into her skull as though she were trying to read Sunstorm's mind. A little taken by surprise by the sudden question, Sunstorm swallowed hard on the blackbird.

"Uh, it's great. But I've lived there my whole life, I've never known anything else." With a small shrug, she licked her lips, getting rid of the residue of her breakfast.

"I bet it's super dangerous. You never know what is around the corner: predators, a harsh winter, or even a murderer!"

Sunstorm raised her brow suspiciously.

"Oh, Herb told me. We're all friends here -- more than that -- we tell each other everything."

"Well, you're right nonetheless. Only a few moons ago was it that we were dealing with multiplying mountain lions. There was a prophecy from StarClan that saved us. It was all very scary."

The younger cat looked at Sunstorm in awe, apparently impressed by her and her clan. Gazing at her warmly, the older of the two ginger cats pushed against her. "You're welcome to visit any time." This made Clementine even more excitable, and she hopped off to spill all to Duncan, who, in his usual manner, didn't reply but seemed happy in her company.

The dynamics between the Scraps cats was interesting to Sunstorm. They were, in many ways, a lot like a clan. They had a leader, though Invictus swore he had no real authority over them and the others could leave whenever they wanted. Herb has assisted her with fixing up Mudstar's wounds, and she could see him as a medicine cat; he came across as level-headed, and often appeared to act as Invictus' adviser. Duncan would be a perfect warrior, too! Her nose curled at the thought of Trek. He was too hot-headed to be a deputy, especially when she compared him to Redflight. Sunstorm wasn't entirely sure what his role was in this strange little family, but she knew that the others valued him.

Speaking of which, she'd not seen Invictus, Herb or Trek all morning. After the questioning session last night, she expected that they were asleep, but she was proved wrong only a few heartbeats later. Trek appeared from behind a scrapped monster, his face livid and body rigid. Herb and Invictus were close behind, looking more than a little exhausted but definitely not with the same look as

Trek.

"Clan cats, we have something we'd like to discuss with you." Invictus spread his white pelt out on the ground, inviting the others to sit around him. Trek kept a good distance away, scowling like a scolded kit.

"Though we may not know the exact extent of the threat faced by you, we do know that if it is a city cat, they'll be smart. And if there is any possibility of it being one of our own, we need to know; if they come back here and hurt any of us, they'll have me to answer to. I have decided to send Herb and Trek back with you, for your sake as much as ours. They can boost your numbers as both are strong fighters, and when the murderer is found, return here to report back and tell us if we're safe or not."

Poor Clementine looked distraught when she realised she wasn't going, and ran over to Duncan's side, leaning into him sadly.

"You don't have to do that, you know. It's incredibly kind of you." Mudstar replied, clearly slightly surprised by the offer.

"Let them go with you. Like I said, it'll put our minds at rest as well. I told Trek to listen to Herb. He'll behave."

"Then that's settled. You both can become honorary ColdClan members for now."

Sunstorm sneaked a glance at Trek, who looked particularly vibrant under the morning sun. To her shock, he was staring right back at her, anger flickering across his face. If looks could kill, she'd be dead. Unsure as to whether or not to trust the cat, Sunstorm turned her back to him, but she knew that couldn't ignore him for long -- he was coming back to her precious home, and there was nothing she could say to stop him.

Ahhh long chapter... and a heckin lot of speech -flails-

Sorry if it feels a bit meaty and difficult to get into!

The Scraps cats are super fun to write, to be honest. I could write them all day. Especially little Clementine, bless her soul. She's a badass baby who wants to prove her worth to all those big boys she's surrounded by!

Love, TLF xx

(P.S Don't forget to **vote** and **follow** me for instant updates on new chapters and funky fun stuff coming soon!)

9. Skyleap

"Me!? No, what are *you* doing here?"

Skyleap's instant retort was spoken with a forked tongue, the words piercing through the air at such a force she thought it might knock the cat off the cliff backwards. Every second the cat didn't answer, she took a menacing step forward. Neck bristling with anger, there was nothing in the silence except the regular click of her paws against the rock and the heavy breathing of her kits behind her.

"What am I doing here!?" The reply came with more anger than she'd been expecting, and she pulled her head back out of shock. "I can't believe you'd even ask me that when you've brought your kits with you. Wait, what am I even saying? Your kits?! They're *our* kits! You mousebrained fool, they're only, what, five moons old? How could you bring them out here when there is a possible murderer on the loose?"

As if she wasn't feeling guilty enough for bringing her precious kits along already, their father was now stood there in front of them making her feel even worse. This made the new mother all the more irritated. How dare he criticise her when he wasn't even around to take care of them!

Now only a fox-length away from him, she snarled up at the tom. "A possible murderer, huh? My father was potentially the supposed victim of that 'murder' but they got the wrong cat. Don't you dare say that I need to protect my family when that's exactly what I'm trying to do!"

Marshfoot flicked his tail in rage. "You still brought the kits out here. That was irresponsible, Skyleap. I thought you'd know better than that."

She was about to launch into a torrent of bitterness when she was reminded of the presence of her kits.

"Mama?" A questioning Batkit stepped forward, cocking her small head to one side. "Who's this? He smells like HeatClan." She wrinkled her nose a little.

With a sigh, Skyleap threw an exasperated glance in Marshfoot's direction before rounding back towards her children, nudging them into a small huddle and sitting before them. Each one looked up at her with inquisitive eyes, blinking at her, steady and patient. Once more she felt the guilt dripping into her like raindrops on soil, sinking slowly but surely into the ground. With every small mew of anticipation that they made, the storm brewed all the more fiercely inside, but she bottled the thunder inside of her for the sake of the kits.

"Isn't it time they knew, Skyleap?" Using a more gentle tone, she felt Marshfoot's presence stepping closer to her. Torn between telling them and protecting them from the truth, she could hardly bring herself to make a decision and wished that she'd never gotten into the mess in the first place.

Inhaling deeply, Skyleap stepped out of the way so her kits could see Marshfoot.

"Batkit, Antkit, Mothkit... meet your father. This is Marshfoot." The words dripped off her tongue like oil, tangible as opposed to fluid; they travelled to the ears of her kits and sparked different reactions. Batkit, the stubborn she-cat that she was, flinched like she'd been struck by lightning. Antkit was more curious, tilting his bay-coloured head in his father's direction, but he too was just as confused as his sister. And Mothkit... the she-cat showed no expression. In truth, it was her blank face that worried Skyleap the most. Icepaw sat staring at his siblings, waiting to see what they had to say. He knew more than anyone what it was like to have your father be absent from your life. She couldn't help but think that perhaps this was a bad idea.

Stepping forwards to greet them, Marshfoot offered them each a nod of warmth. Skyleap could see on his face that he was thinking how to react, deciding how to proceed... there were no guidelines for this type of thing! Neither of them knew what they were doing! Wishing it was easy, that somehow they could travel back in time

and fix their mistakes... but no. These kits were not mistakes. They were the best thing that had ever happened to Skyleap, and if Marshfoot had missed out on their kithoods, then that was his loss.

A comment from Marshfoot brought her back to reality. "You're all so big! How many moons must you be now? Six, seven? You'll be apprentices in no time. Are you excited?"

"Yeah," Antkit mused out loud, and both Batkit and Antkit shot him a look. "I want to be mentored by Mudstar himself!"

Latching on to the energy that Antkit showed, Marshfoot eagerly nodded. "You've got big dreams then ... uh.."

"That's *Antkit*. Duh." Mothkit interrupted with a forked tongue, and Skyleap could feel the sting of the venom in her voice. "Look, Skyleap, he doesn't even know our names. Can we go home now? This is pointless."

Silence descended on the 'family', if they could even be called that, and tension lingered in the air like a cloud heavy with rain, waiting to release a torrential downpour at any moment.

"I'm sorry..." Marshfoot began, his pained eyes looking at Skyleap's cerulean ones with desperation.

Somewhat sick of the excuses, Skyleap ushered the kits to her side, pulling them in with her tail.

"Wait! You said you were here for information on the murderer. I have just that. Please, let me at least help you by telling you what I know."

Spinning on her heels, she gazed at him expectantly. If he was wasting more of her time, she'd have to release the anger she was already feeling. It wouldn't be a pretty sight.

"Look, I was one of the first here when Foxstar's body was found. His body..." He paused, glancing at the kits, as if what he was about to say was too delicate for their ears. "His body was badly mauled, but there were two different types of wounds on him. Some were deep and messy, whereas others were slick and clean-cut. It was

almost like there had been two different things attacking him as opposed to one."

Icepaw was the first to speak, his brows furrowed together in thought. "You mean there were two killers?"

With a shrug, Marshfoot looked back towards the crag. "I don't know anything for sure, but the evidence points towards it, yes. I guess I'm also worried that it was an inside job. Foxstar was not the greatest leader, and if he angered someone in ColdClan or HeatClan, they could have easily ganged up on him. The rogue could have been a distraction, or even made up by whoever was on that patrol. If you're really investigating this, you should speak to the cats who were out with Foxstar when he received the message meant for Cloudstar. Find out if they're really telling the truth. Or I can do it for you, if you'd like... it would mean meeting up again, of course."

Shaking her head firmly, Skyleap stood rigid, protectively guarding her kits. "I don't think that's a good idea. Thank you for the information. We'll look into it."

Nodding, if a little unhappy with her decision, the HeatClan tom turned to leave. Before he did, however, he flicked his tail in their direction.

"Stay safe -- all of you. If the killer was from ColdClan or HeatClan, they could strike again. I would blame myself if any of you got hurt."

The silver she-cat heard him, but couldn't bring herself to answer him, and stalked back into the thicket of ColdClan's territory. Part of her wanted to look behind, see if he was watching them leave like he'd left them, but she couldn't face him again. The kits walked in silence, as did Skyleap, who was lost in thought all the way back to camp.

Noticing the fluffy shape of Redflight sharing tongues with Tallnose at the base of the leader's rock, she found herself gravitating towards the caring voice of the older tom. Knowing that she could always rely on him if she was ever down, she brushed her maw

gently over each of the kits' heads, asking Icepaw to take them to the queens' den.

"Sorry to interrupt, you two." She spoke gently, trying not to let on to her emotions too much. "Redflight, can we talk?"

The two toms shared a glance, before Tallnose gave a warm smile and nodded at her. He got up and trotted away, giving them the space they needed.

Raising his large head, Redflight peered at Skyleap inquisitively. "I know that look. I mentored you long enough." His soft voice was a warm welcome. Nose reaching out to touch her own, the pair shared a moment of connection. "You've done something you thought was a good idea and now you regret it. Tell me what's up, Skyleap?"

Burying her grey head in his flame-coloured pelt, Skyleap allowed herself to cry a few tears. Sniffing as her ex-mentor comforted her, she spoke with a wobbly voice. "I -- I saw Marshfoot. The ki... kits met him."

"Oh, Skyleap," Tongue rasping over her head, Skyleap felt that she could be six moons again, crying because she'd gotten into trouble with Mudstar. That was the thing about Redflight -- he'd always been on *her* side.

"I don't know how I expected it to go. Batkit and Mothkit didn't want anything to do with him, but poor Antkit didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation. I think he wanted to know his father; he wanted to fill him in on his past and his hopes for the future! And who am I to deprive them of that bond, if they want to make it!?" The words tumbled out and she pawed at the dust beneath her, watching as it was dampened by her falling tears. If only Sunstorm was here. Her sister would know what to do.

"Hey, now. It's ok. You don't have to make any decisions right now, and neither do your kits! They're only young still, and I'm sure if in the future they do want to know Marshfoot, they'll make that effort themselves. You don't have to do *anything*."

"But what if.. what if they like him better than me, in the future?"

Pulling away and nudging her soft chin up, Redflight laid his tail on her back. "Now that's just daft. You're an incredible mother, I'm so proud of who you've become. And those kits know that too! They love you more than anything. You're not going to lose them, Skyleap. You've been there for them since the beginning."

Knowing that the tom was right, Skyleap began to breathe more easily. Irrational thoughts were not in her nature. She didn't have breakdowns like this! Motherhood really was changing her.

"There's something else I need to say." Sitting up straight, she twitched her nose as she thought of how to phrase it. "Marshfoot seems to think that this was two cats. Two rogues, maybe, but I think we need to explore the idea that it could have been two clan cats. I mean, why would rogues kill a clan cat with no reason? It just doesn't make sense."

Shaking his head, Redflight gave a shrug. "This whole thing doesn't make sense. The message from the rogue, the apparent unintended victim, and now maybe even two killers? I sure hope that the cats travelling to the Brightplace have had better luck than us."

Together, the pair mused quietly. Neither wanted to talk any more about the risk of more cats dying, nor did they want to draw attraction to themselves if they were. Spreading fear throughout the clan could cause a mass hysteria, and Skyleap knew that the chaos would be damaging to them. No, morale needed to be kept high.

"Let's investigate this ourselves, Redflight. We'll go to HeatClan, talk to the cats... no need to tell anyone here."

Nodding, Redflight licked her nose in agreement. For he knew that a problem shared was a problem halved.

Perhaps together, they'd be able to find a new lead. Both were left hoping that the trail had not run cold, and that they could find more evidence before the killer strikes again.

Sorry this chapter is a bit rubbish! Lots of talking.
I thought I should get it out as I know it's been a while!

Who do you think the murderer is? Was Foxstar the intended victim? Is it one cat, or maybe more? And will they strike again?
Let me know in the comments!

Love you all <3

10. Sunstorm

Sunhigh came and went like the ebb and flow of the tide, and soon the cats were making plans to leave. Herb and Trek said goodbye to their Scraps friends, with poor Clementine begging them to take her with them. Invictus and Duncan were more understated in their farewells, but it was clear that the group wasn't often apart from each other as they touched noses.

Mudstar, who was back on his feet and fit for travel, directly addressed the group. "We'll be on our way now. Thank you for your hospitality. We promise we'll return Herb and Trek to you in one piece in no time at all!"

Lowering his greying head respectfully, the Scraps leader answered, "and we shall keep our ears to the ground for news on any murders. Hopefully you catch the piece of foxdung who is threatening everyone's peace and quiet."

With that, the two groups parted ways, with Sunstorm's group falling into single file as Herb and Mudstar led them out of the Brightplace. It seemed quicker on the way out, and she had no doubt that it was partially down to their newfound friends whose knowledge of the place was as extensive as the Brightplace itself.

Whilst she was lost in thought as the group moved with the occasional murmur, Spidertail's tabby pelt appeared next to her, and with it came a flash of his friendly pale green eyes. "How you doing?" He asked gently as they picked their way over the last of the fences before hitting the open plains of HeatClan territory.

"I'm ok." Sunstorm returned his warm smile, pressing her shoulder against his momentarily. "Disappointed. But doing ok."

The tom looked away and shrugged. "Yeah, it's annoying that we haven't got any new leads." He lowered his breath, getting closer so that only she could hear him. "And it's annoying that we've been

saddled with these two street cats."

"Huh?" The ginger she-cat's brow furrowed into a frown. "They're here to help us?"

"I don't like the way that Trek is. Gives off some bad vibes. They're *rogues*, Sunstorm, and honestly, I'm not sure why we're trusting them."

"You do realise, Foxstar was *murdered*!? And there's the possibility that it was meant to be Cloudstar?" She snapped back, her voice raising a little. Mistheart glanced back and gave her a frown, and Sunstorm grimaced, once again lowering her tone. "They invited us into their home and looked after us all, especially Mudstar. You saw that he was in a bad way last night. By StarClan, Herb saved us!"

Spidertail shrugged. "Foxstar had it coming. And listen, tell me honestly: if Cloudstar was killed, after everything he did to you and your family, would you *actually* care? He had a secret family in HeatClan, if I remember rightly..."

Sunstorm couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. Is this really what Spidertail thought? What others might think? That murdering someone who'd made mistakes in the past was a 'convenience'? Her eyes flitted over the body of Spidertail as the light scattered through the clouds, creating shadows as they walked through sunbeams. Part of her wondered if perhaps her friend was right. Cloudstar had hurt her family more than anything, and Foxstar had never been a benevolent leader. There was a split in her heart, each one tugging at her mind to win her over, one wanting her to believe that murder in any capacity was wrong and yet something more sinister that she hadn't known before that was eager to side with Spidertail.

"Cloudstar is my father. This is a threat to my family." She stated, though she didn't sound entirely convinced and there was no doubt that Spidertail could see it.

His gaze made her uneasy as he bore into her soul with those eyes so green. "No, Sunstorm. Berrystep and Skyleap and all three of her kits are your family. ColdClan is your family. Your family are cats who love you, cats who will put you and your happiness before

anything else... like me." There was a pause in his short monologue as he let the words set in. But, as quickly as the words had rolled off his tongue, he shook his head and turned it towards those in front. "We should catch up with them." With that, he shot off, closing the gap between them and the main group.

Sunstorm had to stop, taken aback by the confession she'd just received. Her body rigid in shock, the only thing she could look at were her ginger paws which were seemingly glued to the ground. What had just happened? *Had Spidertail told her he loved her?*

Squeak.

Suddenly on high alert, Sunstorm's ears pricked up and perked forward, defensively crouching. There had definitely been a noise from behind a nearby thicket, but from what she could see, there was nothing there. Her eyes narrowed into curious slits and all of the events that had just happened filtered to the back of her brain. Nose twitching as she was unsure whether to be interested or afraid, her body began to tremble a little as she rounded the bush and there was nothing there. Lifting her soft features to look into the distance, she saw that the cats she was walking with were getting further and further away. Whatever it was that had made the noise, it was not worth bothering about now.

As Sunstorm turned to leave, her soft marmalade pelt shining in the afternoon sun, she allowed herself to close her eyes for a moment and have just a second of isolation. Everything that Spidertail had just said ran through her head quicker than a hare. But she couldn't think about that now. She had to catch up with the others.

Eyes steadily opening, her gaze was met with blue sky, a barren wasteland filled only with thickets and desert flowers, and a pale ginger she-cat sat with her head tilted to the left.

Sunstorm let out a yelp.

The other cat jumped backwards, squealing as she did so.

"StarClan, help me! --- uh, *Clementine*?"

"Hey." The younger cat said with a grin, curling her tail around her body neatly as she sat down again.

"What are you doing here? You're meant to stay with Invictus and Duncan!"

"I know, I know..." Clementine rolled her eyes, pawing at the dry ground beneath her. "But it was so boring there, and I could hardly let Herb and Trek have all the adventures, could I?" Leaping to her feet, she wiggled her body as she eased into an attack position. "I'm ready for danger, murderers, and whatever StarClan throws at us!"

Slowly, Sunstorm's breathing returned to normal and her heart rate fell back into a proper rhythm. "Us? No, Clementine, it's dangerous where I live at the minute. You need to go back!" *Yeah*, she thought. *Dangerous with emotions that you don't know you can experience. And toms. Dangerous with toms.*

Returning from her digression, she found Clementine mid-speech.

"-- and there's no way that I can just talk to Invictus all day. I mean, I love Duncan but he just never speaks. You know how much of a pain that is? I end up basically talking to myself with him. But anyway, we've been all over the Brightplace together and it's so boring now, we've ran out of places to explore. We nearly got captured by nofurs.. uh, I mean, twolegs, but we totally escaped." Launching herself from side to side, Clementine gave a demonstration of how she managed to dodge the twoleg nets.

"Alright. You can come."

Clementine tripped over her paw and landed in a heap at Sunstorm's paws. "Wait, what?"

"I said, you can come. It's too far for you to go back, really. And you clearly want to be here. Plus, I could do with the company. The others are pretty far ahead now."

Bouncing around the older she-cat as though she were a kit, Clementine burst into a chorus of happy squeals. "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you! We're going to have so much fun together..."

"Just, remember someone was killed, Clementine?" Sunstorm said gently.

The cat looked a little embarrassed, but it was only for a second, as after she was leaping up and down again like she was some kind of lamb. "Call me Clem!" She said, before shooting off in the direction of ColdClan territory.

With a sigh, Sunstorm launched into a full blown run in an attempt to keep up with Clem. That cat sure had some energy!

- - -

It wasn't long before the group of cats, who had scolded and then accepted Clementine, were making their way back into the depths of the forest and towards the ColdClan camp. Sunstorm and Clem walked side by side, the older cat happily listening to the younger one reel off her adventures and tell her tales of the terrifying beasts she'd overcome in the Brightplace. Even Stagfoot added in some of his own stories from when he was a kittypet here and there, of which even Clementine was in awe of.

Camp was busy when they entered the clearing, but steadily it formed into one bulk of cats whose voices rose up.

"Look!" Said one voice.

"The cats have returned!" Shouted another.

It was a touchingly poignant moment as there were plenty of reunions, from Mudstar and Mosspelt who delicately entwined their tails together as Fishpaw and Stonepaw rubbed their heads against their father, to Stagfoot and Fawngaze who stood proudly a few mouselengths away from her mate as the two new apprentices Frogpaw and Crowpaw told him about their ceremony. Even the stone-cold Webfall seemed pleased to see his adoptive daughter Mistheart, who gave him a familial lick on the forehead.

Through the crowd, Sunstorm spotted Skyleap, Antkit, Mothkit, Batkit and Icekit -- her *family*. Spidertail had been right about that. With a happy yelp, she bowled into her sister and the pair rolled on

the floor in a state of reunited bliss. When they pulled apart, it was the younger ones' turn to show their appreciation towards their aunt, stumbling around her ankles. It was Batkit who was quick to tell Sunstorm that Icekit was now Icepaw, and she gave him a proud lick whilst he blushed, forever the humble tom. Berrystep soon joined them, rubbing her pelt between her two daughters affectionately.

It was the presence of Clementine which brought Sunstorm's attention away from the group, and she turned to see the cat's curious face watching from the sidelines. With a small smile at Sunstorm, the cat turned to join Herb and Trek who sat a little uncomfortably at the entrance, being stared at by the curious kits Minnowkit and Milkkit who had emerged from their den.

"You smell funny." Minnowkit stated, staring up at Herb and Trek.

"Oh, thanks." Herb said with a snort.

"Clem, come meet everyone." Turning her attention back to her newfound friend, she called after her and the she-cat instantly spun on her heels with a look of shock that she was being allowed into the moment that she thought the family was sharing. It was the first time the ginger cat had shut up in their travels, and she couldn't help but laugh! "Clem, this is my mother, Berrystep, and my sister, Skyleap. Berrystep, Skyleap, this is Clementine."

Berrystep approached her warmly. "Hello, Clementine. Welcome to ColdClan."

Her sister seemed more wary, confused as to why a street cat was being greeted into their midst. With one step forward, she bent her delicate grey head towards Clem, who looked back at her as though she was some sort of heroine. Which, Sunstorm guessed, she'd kind of made her sister out to be in the tales she'd told Clem. With a pointed glance from Sunstorm that conveyed her eagerness for Clementine to be liked by her family, Skyleap stepped forward and pressed her nose to the young cat. "Nice to meet you, Clem."

Once her kits had seen that this stranger was one not to be afraid of, they tumbled over each other to make their presence known.

Icepaw was the only one who was more reserved, hovering next to Skyleap as he watched his siblings try and attract the most attention from Clementine.

"Clem, what's it like living in the Brightplace?" Antkit mewed, staring up at her with his big eyes.

Before she even had chance to answer, Batkit had shoved her brother out the way. "Hey, hey, hey! Clem, come play with me!"

Even Mothkit, who usually had control over herself, was trying to peer over the heads of her siblings. "Allow me to give you a tour, Clem. I know all the best places to sun yourself."

"Alright, you lot!" Skyleap interjected, wafting them aside with one sweep of her tail. "Why don't you all show her around? Go on, off you go now."

Ushering them away, she turned to Icepaw. "Go watch them, will you Icepaw? I don't want them harassing that poor cat too much."

"I wouldn't worry," Sunstorm laughed as she pressed against Skyleap's grey fur. "She can talk just as much as they can, believe me!"

As the small group walked away, surrounding Clementine as though they were her bodyguards, the three she-cats turned back to each other. Sunstorm considered how good it was to see them. She hated being away from them for so long.

"Anything happen whilst we were away?" She asked.

Skyleap suddenly seemed uneasy, pawing at the dusty ground beneath her paws. There was an attempt to meet her sister's gaze, but it was quickly broken. Even their mother could see that something was wrong.

"Tell us, Skyleap." Berrystep pressed her daughter.

With a little hesitation and a lot of glances towards her kits as they moved around camp, she dropped her head even lower to the ground. "I saw Marshfoot... and so did the kits." She muttered. "At

the site of the murder."

Both her family members were more than a little taken aback, and their mouths hung open like the trouts that sometimes migrated upstream in their nearby creek.

"But... why?" Berrystep asked, as confused as Sunstorm.

Shrugging, the silver she-cat's body rippled with a sigh. "I guess I just... still need to feel like a member of the clan. And not just a queen who lounges around waiting for everyone else to do everything."

Before they even had time to scold or condemn Skyleap's actions, a shrill whistle came up to sound that a hunting party was returning. They would have continued their conversation if it wasn't for the desperate screams that came after it.

Tallnose, Roseflower and Robinpaw scrambled into camp. The older tom's eyes were wild with fear, dancing around the camp seemingly searching for Mudstar. Roseflower was panting and half-screaming, desperately trying not to cry. And for the youthful apprentice, an apparent numbness had washed over him as though he was drowning in the things he'd seen.

Rowanwhisker was by Roseflower's side in an instance, his mate burying her head in his chest and sobbing. The father of Robinpaw, Webfall, seemed angry. His voice roared through camp, asking over and over again for his son. He saw the other cats' faces before he saw that of his kit, and the premonition that he felt, just like any parent when their child is in danger, was one that sickened him to the stomach. Their leader had been in his den, and he stepped out slowly, clearly not recognising the desperation of the situation. With a wild howl when he found a chaotic camp, he raced over to the trio of terrified cats.

"Tell me what happened!" He bellowed, spiralling from one cat to the next.

Tallnose, choking on his voice, had dropped to the floor, his mackerel coloured legs too shaky to hold him.

"Th-the... the murderer." The realisation of what he was saying crashed into the camp like a wave. "*The murderer has killed again*."

---

gasp

Who's the murderer killed this time? Will it be a ColdClan or HeatClan cat? Share your theories below!

This chapter is dedicated to @CrystalSisters as they commented that Mothkit was their favourite character so far!

Want your own shout out? Tell me who your favourite character is below!

As always, thanks for reading! <3

11. Skyleap

The ColdClan camp quickly descended into chaos once more, with screaming cats flying across the dusty ground trying to round up there loved ones. Mudstar stood shell-shocked for a moment, before the ever-wise Redflight nudged him a little and the brown tom leapt into action.

"Enough!" He thundered, his voice carrying effectively across the clearing. "I will not allow one cat to threaten the safety and sanctuary of my clan!"

Settling a little, though still clearly on edge, cats of all ages huddled together protectively. The tension was high in the clan and Skyleap felt it cutting into her bones. Though the murderer may not be among them currently, she pulled her kits closer to her chest -- there was no way she would allow any of them to be alone in a time like this. She glanced down at them, checking that they weren't too scared. The amber-coloured Antkit was trembling the most, so she tucked him closest to her chest; she had a soft spot for the quiet kit as he was one of the sweetest young cats she'd ever met. His heart was nothing but love and warmth, much like her sister Sunstorm. Batkit and Mothkit, the two kits who usually fell out the most often in the den, where sat side by side with their tails wrapped around each other. Though they sometimes argued, they were more similar than they could imagine; both had nerves of steel and even when they were shaken, they still composed themselves. Icepaw was a little older than the other kits, and sat further away from her, watching the chaos in the camp with his bright blue eyes. Reaching over, she rasped her tongue over his head in one quick motion, trying to show him that she hadn't forgotten her adopted son.

Her attention turned back to her clanmates, who still all looked lost and confused. Redflight and Mudstar seemed to share few words, glancing over at Sunstorm who was tending to the cats who had found the body and checking them for any physical injuries.

Skyleap could hear her calming tone from where she sat, and she couldn't help but give a slight smile at the voice she knew so well.

"I need some cats to help Sunstorm." Mudstar finally began barking his orders out. "We need to move Roseflower, Tallnose and Robinpaw to Sunstorm's den!"

Sootleg's dark body appeared at Tallnose's side, worryingly pushing against his son who seemed paralysed. As Tallnose leaned on his father, Mistheart gently nudged Robinpaw's cheek. Webfall was still at his side, staring at his son with a face full of worry. The pair also made their way over towards the entrance to the medicine cat den. That left Roseflower, who trembled into her mother's pelt, her father also there licking her pelt. Lakeheart and Silvernose guided the young cat towards the den, and Sunstorm made up the rear. Noticing Sunstorm glance at Mudstar, she saw the worried look the pair of them shared. Events like these could leave cats' mental states scarred for life.

"Redflight, Creekwillow, Owlfoot, and Skyleap... I want you to join me as we go and see the body. We need to establish what happened and who has been killed." Eyes darting around, they eventually landed on his mate and his gaze softened a little. "Mosspelt is in charge. She will make sure no harm comes to any of you -- I trust her with my life."

With that, he signalled with his tail for the group to follow him. The urgency was unparalleled, but Skyleap had to pause as she realised Mudstar had forgotten her priority. When she looked at her kits, she didn't want to leave them... they were her everything now. A cat appeared at her side, gently flicking her tail over Skyleap's grey back.

"I shall look after them, Skyleap. Do not fear." It was the gentle voice of Fawngaze, whose kindness extended further than any other cat she'd ever known. The kits adored Fawngaze and her sons, Frogpaw and Crowpaw.

"Be safe, my kin." She whispered, licking each of their heads individually.

With that, she was chasing after the party of cats who were already making pace down the rocky mountain side, through the trees that sheltered it. Living up to her name, she jumped over fallen branches and scampered through piles of leaves. It had been a while since she'd leapt around like this, and she realised how much she'd missed racing through the woodlands hunting squirrels.

By the time they reached the place where Tallnose had told them they'd found the body, Skyleap was exhausted. Rather unfit from being a queen, she breathed heavily, only being silenced when the group pulled to a halt a short distance from the same rocky outcrop that Foxstar had been found on.

In front of them, a mass that was not natural laid on the ground.

Skyleap half expected it to be Cloudstar. Maybe somehow they'd convinced the on-edge leader to come out here, or perhaps they blackmailed him with his family's lives... Owlfoot hovered towards the back of the group, whilst Creekwillow, Redflight and Mudstar moved forwards slowly. Skyleap found herself simply stood there, unable to move forwards or backwards.

"Oh, StarClan..." Redflight breathed, as a clearly repulsed Creekwillow spun around on her heels and walked a few steps back, shielding her face from the gruesome sight. Redflight and Mudstar looked at each other, as though they were telepathically connected.

There was no more waiting. She had to see for herself.

Stepping forward, she found her view blocked by Redflight. "It's bad, Skyleap." He muttered, but didn't try and stop her from seeing. Convinced that it was Cloudstar, she felt the tears welling in her eyes and she finally stopped in front of the body.

There in front of her was not the body of her father. The crooked face of a tom she'd known blankly lay beneath her. White fur stained with red met her eyes, and the tom was smaller than her father.

"*Coldfrost...*" She gasped, tripping over as she took a step backwards.

This only raised more questions than it answered. Was this another botched attempt at trying to kill Cloudstar? Was this a separate killer, or the same one? Maybe the mountain lions that had plagued their clans not so long ago had come back -- the wounds Coldfrost had sustained looked just like that of something trained to kill.

A sudden movement from the shadows sent the ColdClan cats into high alert. They all heard the noise, and their heads snapped in the same direction -- towards the HeatClan camp.

Approaching them was a cat she knew very little about, named Vinepuddle. The tom was bulky, with dark green eyes and a patchwork pelt. At first, she'd thought he was alone, but suddenly there was two, then three, then more cats emerging from the shadows. In total, she could count five HeatClan cats, and they all seemed agitated towards her clanmates.

Vinepuddle was the first to see the body, and he let out a rumble of horror.

"What is it, Vinepuddle?" A young she-cat (unbeknown to Skyleap named Cherrythorn) asked, sounded half worried and half curious.

Slowly after checking the body over and giving Coldfrost's head a lick, Vinepuddle raised his maw towards the ColdClan cats.

"We had a patrol out, and they found him like this --" Mudstar began, but Vinepuddle cut him off, the anger clearly boiling out of him now.

"ColdClan have killed our deputy." He snarled, unsheathing his claws. His fellow clanmates looked momentarily shocked, before also descending into the manic rage that Skyleap could see the tom was feeling.

Redflight stepped forward, trying to reason with them. "I promise you, by StarClan, it wasn't us!" It was no use, however. Skyleap could feel a fight coming, and she wasn't sure if she was ready. The last time she had properly fought would likely have been in the huge battle against HeatClan before her kits were born. *My kits...* She considered, slightly worried that they would have nobody to

look after them if she died in this moment.

It was no use thinking about it, however, as the she-cat and senior warrior Rabbitnose had launched herself in Skyleap's direction. Choking on a scream, she tried to dart out the way, but was caught up in the claws of her attacker. Behind her, she could hear Owlfoot's battle yowls as he fought Cherrythorn; Skyleap worried for him, as Owlfoot had been quicker with his words than with his battle moves.

Rabbitnose had her pinned down, and was trying to land a hit on her head, though Skyleap successfully batted her out of the way each time. She tried to wriggle out from under the calico cat's grip, but to no avail. Hissing in Rabbitnose's face, Skyleap instead tried to use her front legs to scrape at the eyes of the lithe she-cat. This worked, and she managed to scratch a long line between her right eye and her pale pink nose, which made her loosen her grip for a moment. Rolling away from her, Skyleap narrowly missed Mudstar and Vinepuddle who were locked in a dangerous tussle. Whilst Vinepuddle was larger and more muscular, Mudstar was much more agile, and sly about his attacks.

Creekwillow was the other side of Coldfrost's dead body, and had just ripped at the ear of Nettlepelt. She had previously been fighting two cats, however, and Skyleap became very aware all of a sudden that one of them had disappeared. Unfortunately, she couldn't think about it for long, as Rabbitnose's shrill call rose from behind her again and Skyleap turned to confront her. The pain from Rabbitnose's injury clearly had spiked her adrenaline, and she was much more enraged than before. Skyleap tried to launch an attack, but instead managed to be tossed to the side, almost falling off the edge of the rocky outcrop they were on.

"Your death will avenge Coldfrost's!" Rabbitnose mewed angrily.

But Skyleap had lost focus on Rabbitnose and was looking behind her. She was stunned to silence to see Owlfoot fighting two cats, Cherrythorn and Mapleheart. They were dominating him, dragging each of his limbs out from underneath him as he tried to claw at them both. Cherrythorn's teeth found a way around his tail, and spun him around like he was a piece of prey. When she let go, the

cat was knocked to the side, his head smashing into a nearby rock. The sound of a cracking skull was deafening, and even Rabbitnose paused her attack to get a look.

"See what happened to your ColdClan friend? You're next, Skyleap." She hissed.

"Father!?"

A voice Skyleap didn't know broke through the sound of battle. It was quiet, but it faltered as it tried to speak. Everything moved in slow motion as the cats seemed to stop fighting to see whose voice was cracking into the yowls of the fight. When Skyleap looked for herself, she was shocked to see a cinnamon-coloured cat staring down at them all. She guessed that the she-cat must have heard the commotion, and come running to help her clan.

"Beeface..." Rabbitnose pulled back from her attack in an instance, as did Vinepuddle. The pair shared a look before walking slowly towards her, as if they were scared of what she might do.

"My father... is dead?" The she-cat they called Beeface was only young, but had already lost her mother, as Skyleap knew all too well. She had been the one to kill her, after all, though of course she was not proud that she'd stolen a mother away from her daughter.

Now, the young cat's father had been ripped from her too, by an unknown but brutal source. Nobody moved as Beeface approached the dead body, clearly trying not to sob out loud. Burying her head in the tainted pelt of her father, she let out a yowl as she looked up towards StarClan.

Everyone's heads bent respectfully as she mourned the loss of her last surviving family member. Beeface's body was limp and it was like she had given up on life. Skyleap half expected her to crash to the ground.

Slowly, she looked up at Mudstar. "Did ColdClan do this?" She asked, her voice faltering at every word.

"I promise you, by StarClan and my family," Mudstar began, his brown pelt moving towards hers in an attempt at comfort. The she-cat moved away from him. She did not want to be touched. "ColdClan did not do this. At least, not under any order I gave. This was the same murderer as whoever killed Foxstar -- it has to be." He said firmly. "My patrol found the body, and they were so shaken by it, Beeface. I am so sorry for your loss."

The she-cat didn't say anything for a while, but also couldn't bring herself to look at any of the cats, be they HeatClan or ColdClan. When she finally did speak, it was through droplets of tears that showed her anger and sadness all in one.

"If it wasn't ColdClan, then who was it? Who would dare touch the unbreakable soul of Coldfrost. I want to know. I *need* to know! Whoever killed my father will be punished under the laws of StarClan! If it wasn't you, ColdClan cats, find who did do it. Or else HeatClan will assume that you are lying, and *we are not afraid to engage in war*."

Thanks for reading, as always!

This chapter is dedicated to @grayturtle for their sweet comments about their favourite character, Spidertail, as he's apparently so nice to Sunstorm. I'm inclined to agree!

<3

12. Sunstorm

Standing in the entrance to the medicine cat den, Sunstorm impatiently pawed at the ground beneath her. There was a frown burdening her gentle features. As the sun had shifted in its usual pattern across the sky, Sunstorm's worry had grown heavier and heavier and the weight in her throat couldn't be swallowed. The group that had left were not back yet, and of course, Sunstorm was a nervous wreck, half expecting to have to send out a patrol only to find the dead bodies of her sister and her clanmates.

Those who had found the second body had been shaken to the core, and she could hardly blame them. Her mind flickered back to the moment of her precious Larkwing's death, remembering how cold and empty her body had been when the life ebbed away from her. All those who died would walk with StarClan now, and leave the husks of their previous self to the earth.

Robinpaw and Roseflower had been the pair she had been most worried about, as Tallnose had always been brave and was recovering quickly. The two youngest cats had been looked over by Sunstorm, and she'd been thankful to find no physical injuries. Thankfully, they were now resting in their own dens -- Roseflower snuggled close to Rowanwhisker, watched over by her parents, and Robinpaw of course protected by Webfall. Though she didn't particularly like the antagonistic tom, she couldn't fault his commitment to his family.

Unlike her own father.

Sunstorm remembered her visit to HeatClan, and how her father had explained that the killer may have truly been after him. Who would want to kill Cloudstar? Someone jealous that he had become deputy, perhaps? For a heartbeat, she wondered if perhaps one of her own kin -- Berrystep, or even Skyleap -- could have wanted to kill Cloudstar for what they'd done to her family. But she *knew* them both, and trusted them with her life. Murder just wasn't in their

nature; her mother had always preached love, and although Skyleap could be quick to anger, she knew that her sister wouldn't risk losing her kits.

A voice broke the silence that she had been musing in, and her head darted towards it.

"Sunstorm?" It was Herb who spoke, but Trek was by his side, and the pair were both accompanied by Stagfoot who had taken them under his wing (and who towered above the pair of them). Clementine wasn't with them; the last time she'd seen the young cat, she'd been helping keep the kits entertained and their minds off what they had heard. Sunstorm was proud that the clan seemed to like and trust the ginger she-cat, as Sunstorm herself enjoyed Clem's company.

"Is everything ok?" She asked politely.

Herb looked like an utterly black shadow next to Trek, who's pelt glowed magnificently in the sunlight. She realised just how impressive his markings and colouring was in that moment, but didn't want to stare, so turned her attention back to the green eyes of Herb.

"We're 'lright, but we were wonderin' if there was anything we could do for yous?"

Considering the proposal for a second, she turned on her heels to peer back into the darkness of her den. When her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she studied the piles of herbs lining the cave walls, and noticed that her goatweed supplies were particularly low -- she'd used it as a calming agent for the three cats who'd found the body.

"Goatweed," she thought out loud, before turning and repeating it to Herb. "I need goatweed. Maybe Stagfoot could show you where to get some? You should be careful; the murderer might still be out there. Thank you so much for your help, though." She added.

Herb and Stagfoot nodded at each other, before heading off in the direction of the stream. Stagfoot knew exactly what to look for --

when he'd been a kittypet, he'd used herbs himself.

Watching them leave, she noticed that Trek had gone to follow them, but then seemingly changed his mind. When he turned back around, their eyes met, and for a second, Sunstorm felt hot under her pelt.

"I guess they don't need me as well." He finally said, walking back over to her.

Shaking her head, she steadily sat down. Surprisingly, Trek did the same, and they sat in silence for a moment.

"No sign of the others yet?" Trek asked.

"Nope. I'm beginning to get worried." She admitted.

"I'm sure they're fine." Pausing, he turned to look at her again. "Your sister seems like a strong she-cat."

"She is." Sunstorm smiled internally, for she was more proud of her sister than anything she'd been before. The kits she'd raised, at the same time as investigating this murder... it was just incredible.

Again, the pair of them fell quiet, but it was less awkward and more like enjoying each others' company. Trek seemed like such a confusing soul -- one minute he wanted nothing to do with her, the next he would have a conversation with her.

Trek's tail flicked left and right contently. He seemed to draw rigid for a moment, however, before admitting something. "I had a sister once."

Slightly shocked, Sunstorm tilted her head towards him curiously. "Oh?" She'd thought that Trek's only family were the Scraps cats, but then scolded herself mentally for being so naive. He'd come from somewhere!

"Mmh," he continued, staring into the distance. "Her name was Medea, and we were best friends... not so different to you and Skyleap."

Sunstorm gazed up at him warmly, enjoying the fact that Trek felt comfortable enough to reminisce with her.

And then he went cold again.

"She's dead now."

Taken aback, Sunstorm quickly looked away. The thought of losing Skyleap had always been too much to bear anyway, but hearing Trek's hollow voice made her feel his pain. "I am so sorry, Trek."

A yowl made them both shoot to their feet, all thoughts of their previous conversation snapping out of their heads. Scanning the shadows of the trees for the source of the noise, Sunstorm herself let out a mew of shock horror when she saw the cats returning. They looked so broken, their faces bloodied and upset. Skyleap hobbled next to her old mentor, Redflight, and Sunstorm felt herself almost bursting into tears when she saw her precious sister was injured. However, the grey she-cat was no where near as badly hurt as Owlfoot, who was being dragged along by Creekwillow and Mudstar. Medicine cat mode kicked in, and she was by his side in a flash, joined by Trek.

"Get him in the medicine cat den. Quickly!" She ordered.

The orange pelt of Trek nudged Creekwillow out of the way, as the she-cat looked like she was in pain. The two toms pulled the unconscious Owlfoot as quickly and as delicately as they could towards the den. When they were inside, Sunstorm found herself with the gall to order Mudstar around.

"Fetch Fishpaw!"

With a nod, he was gone, and she was left with her patient and Trek.

Though he was unconscious, Sunstorm made a quick judgement of the situation. Scanning him over, Sunstorm assessed the situation in her head. He could be saved. It wouldn't be too hard. She'd seen Larkwing do it before, on patients in a worse condition than this.

"Trek, pass me some poppy seeds. Crush them up a little first."

Doing as he was told, Trek moved in one smooth move. Steadily opening Owlfoot's mouth, she placed the crushed poppy on his tongue and breathed on him gently, causing him to swallow. *That should ease his pain a little*, she thought.

Next, both her and Fishpaw would have to attend to the deep wounds on his skin. Right on time, the half-tail apprentice skittered in, losing her balance a little thanks to the loss of her tail. With a squeak when she saw the state Owlfoot was in, she glanced at Sunstorm for reassurance.

"Spider webs, Fishpaw." She stated.

Together they made poultices, assisted by Trek, and applied them to the wounds. The worst ones were on his chest, and Sunstorm grimaced as she imagined how brutal the battle must have been. The trio's paws were bloodied and sticky, but nowhere near as much as poor Owlfoot's brown fur. When they were done, they stood there for a moment, simply staring at the still body beneath them.

"I think he's stable. But we'll see overnight." Sunstorm commented. "Fishpaw, will you stay with him?"

The small she-cat nodded, and Sunstorm felt proud that the little cat was already learning so quickly. She wondered if this was how Larkwing had felt towards her.

Leaving the den as quickly as she could, she finally found Skyleap. There had been no chance to check her sister over, or even find out who's body they'd found, and so Sunstorm was desperate to talk to the pretty grey cat. At that current moment, Skyleap was resting in the back of the queen's den, her young kits tucked neatly around, her worried about their mother's well-being. Icepaw had been particularly concerned and had made sure to stand guard of the den, "just in case" the murderer or HeatClan cats came back. Sunstorm would like to see Icepaw take them all on, fuelled with rage that his adoptive mother had been hurt. She had no doubts that he would win.

When she entered, Skyleap was actually awake. Her wounds had

been bound by Berrystep, who often helped Sunstorm in the medicine cat den with small injuries. The small alcove that she lay in was right at the back, away from the other queens -- perfect to have a conversation in.

Hopping straight over to her sister, Sunstorm thrust her nose into her sister's pelt, to which Skyleap gave a bleat of shock mixed with slight pain.

"Sorry, sorry." Sunstorm said worriedly, checking her over quickly to make sure she hadn't injured her more.

"It's ok. Those poppy seeds helped. I'm just tired now."

Nodding, Sunstorm settled in front of her. "I can imagine."

"Do you want to know who's body we found?" Skyleap's voice lowered a little, though nothing could wake the exhausted sleeping kits that surrounded her.

Again, Sunstorm nodded, though her body acted without her mind as she wasn't convinced that she truly did want to know.

"Coldfrost. The deputy. I killed his mate and now he's dead. And his kit is parent-less."

"You didn't kill his mate, Skyleap. She fell off the cliff -- you were protecting yourself."

Skyleap shrugged her off, though Sunstorm knew that wasn't the point of the conversation they were having. Let bygones be bygones, and all that.

"So, why him?" She asked, her amber-green eyes narrowing.

Breathing a deep sigh, Skyleap shifted her body weight to allow herself to be more comfortable.

"I have no idea. Power, perhaps? Jealousy? Another botched attempt at trying to get Cloudstar? Though surely after one missed hit, it wouldn't happen twice... all the cats around here know exactly who Cloudstar is."

"Which makes me think it isn't a cat from around here." Sunstorm mused.

Skyleap had no time to respond, however, as she suddenly found Trek looming over her almost eerily. He seemed to be trying not to panic and his voice was a low rumble so as not to wake the kits, but his usually blank pale green eyes were alive with fear.

"Sunstorm, you need to come right now." He stated, before running out of the den, which had fallen silent from the presence of the tom.

With a single glance at Skyleap, who looked at her worriedly but didn't have the energy to follow, Sunstorm was outside once more. It seemed that she was not going to stop going back and forth today, and her paws carried her in a few heartbeats straight to her den. There she found carnage.

Fishpaw was desperately licking Owlfoot's spine, whilst sobbing into his fur. Trek, who had made it back only moments before, had knocked off a whole shelf of herbs onto the floor by mistake and was sorting through them looking for something, no doubt that Fishpaw had asked for.

"He-- he isn't breathing, Sunstorm!" Fishpaw choked on her words.

For a moment, she was struck dumbfounded. Sunstorm had been so sure that Owlfoot would be alright. Everyone was always alright since Larkwing died. She hardly lost any cat, always managing to bring them back from the edge of death. But in front of her now laid the cold shell of someone she would have trusted with her life.

"Sunstorm! *Sunstorm*!" Trek yelled at her, and she snapped out of her trance.

Feeling along his stomach, Sunstorm desperately searched for the cause of this -- even though it may be too late. As her paws rippled over him, she hit something swollen, and realised that she'd missed it when she had initially looked over him. Sucking in a quick breath, she felt it some more -- this was the cause.

"I... I missed something..." Her voice was so quiet that you may have

missed it. "He's bleeding inside. There's nothing I can do."

Fishpaw and Trek shared an angry, upset glance.

"There must be something, Sunstorm. Anything!" Fishpaw squealed at her, though the desperate tone didn't even register in the paralysed Sunstorm.

Staring at her with his mouth open in horror at the fact that they'd just watch a clanmate die, Trek shook his head in disbelief. He met Sunstorm's eyes and she hated what reflected back at her. Sheer judgement. A look of disappointment, like she hadn't lived up to his expectations. She didn't want to look at him any more. Who was he to judge her?

The young medicine cat's screaming had attracted Mudstar and Redflight, who had struggled over from their rest to the commotion. The pair stared at the room, and nobody said anything except for Fishpaw who simply howled in anguish.

"Owlfoot is dead." Sunstorm said blankly. "I killed him."

ColdClan double bill!? Yes please!

This chapter is dedicated to @xxAsh_Playerxx as they commented that their favourite character was Batkit because she is a tough little furball! I'm inclined to agree, she's just like her mother!

Thanks for reading <3

allegiances and relations [three]

MAJOR EVENTS

Both Clans

>> One moon has passed since the start of this book.

>> There is talk of a gathering to discuss the recent developments of the murder case.

ColdClan

>> Owlfoot has passed away thanks to his injuries sustained from the fight with HeatClan.

>> Crowpaw's new mentor has not yet been chosen, as it previously was Owlfoot.

>> Crowpaw, Frogpaw and Icepaw are all now apprentices. Frogpaw is mentored by Berrystep and Icepaw is mentored by Redflight.

HeatClan

>> Coldfrost has passed away, presumably from the murderer.

>> HeatClan has not yet picked a new deputy.

COLDCLAN

Leader - Mudstar; *male, 59 moons, mate is Mosspelt, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw. (2 lives.)*

Deputy - Redflight; *male, 60 moons, brother of Riverdew, mentor to Icepaw.*

Medicine Cat - Sunstorm; *female, 19 moons, daughter of Cloudstar and Berrystep, sister is Skyleap.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - Fishpaw; *female, 10 moons, brother is Stonepaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar.*

Warriors -

>> Berrystep; *female, 50 moons, mate was Cloudmask, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap, sister is Mosspelt, mentor to Frogpaw.*

>> Sandfall; *female, 33 moons, mate of Sootleg, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

>> Sootleg; *male, 39 moons, mate of Sandfall, sons are Rowanwhisker, Spidertail and Tallnose.*

>> Webfall; *male, 30 moons, mate of Mousecloud, adoptive father to Mistheart, sons are Robinpaw and Heronpaw.*

>> Lakeheart*; male, 49 moons, mate of Silvernose, brother of Creekwillow, daughter is Roseflower, son is Echopad.*

>> Creekwillow*; female, 49 moons, sister of Lakeheart, mentor to Heronpaw.*

>> Mistheart; *female, 20 moons, unknown family, adoptive father is Webfall, mate is Tallnose.*

>> Rowanwhisker; *male, 17 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Spidertail and Tallnose, mate is Roseflower.*

>> Stagfoot; *male, 51 moons, mate is Fawngaze, sons are Crowpaw and Frogpaw, mentor to Stonepaw.*

>> Spidertail; *male, 17 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers are Rowanwhisker and Tallnose.*

>> Tallnose; *male, 17 moons, son of Sandfall and Sootleg, brothers*

are Spidertail and Rowanwhisker, mate is Mistheart, mentor to Robinpaw.

>> Echopad; *male, 14 moons, sister is Roseflower, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart.*

>> Roseflower; *female, 14 moons, brother is Echopad, parents are Silvernose and Lakeheart, mate is Rowanwhisker.*

>> Mosspelt; *female, 50 moons, mate is Mudstar, daughter is Fishpaw, son is Stonepaw, sister is Berrystep.*

>> Fawngaze; *female, 30 moons, sons are Frogpaw and Crowpaw, mate is Stagfoot.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

>> Mousecloud; *female, 24 moons, expecting kits, mate of Webfall, sister of Owlfoot, sons are Heronpaw and Robinpaw.*

>> Skyleap; *female, 19 moons, daughter of Cloudstar and Berrystep, sister is Sunstorm, daughters are Mothkit and Batkit, son is Antkit, adoptive mother to Icepaw.*

>> Magpiefur; *female, 20 moons, daughter of Riverdew and Clearwhisker who now belong to HeatClan, daughters are Milkkit and Minnowkit, mate was the now deceased Owlfoot.*

>> Silvernose; *female, 39 moons, mate is Lakeheart, daughter is Roseflower, son is Echopad, expecting kits.*

Kits -

>> Milkkit; *female, 6 moons, sister is Minnowkit, parents are Owlfoot (deceased) and Magpiefur.*

>> Minnowkit; *female, 6 moons, sister is Milkkit, parents are Owlfoot (deceased) and Magpiefur.*

>> Antkit; *male, 6 moons, sisters are Mothkit and Batkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Mothkit; *female, 6 moons, sister is Batkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

>> Batkit; *female, 6 moons, sister is Mothkit, brother is Antkit, father is Marshfoot of HeatClan, mother is Skyleap.*

Apprentices -

>> Robinpaw; *male, 9 moons, brother is Heronpaw, parents are Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Tallnose.*

>> Heronpaw; *male, 9 moons, brother is Robinpaw, parents are Mousecloud and Webfall, mentor is Creekwillow.*

>> Stonepaw; *male, 10 moons, sister is Fishpaw, parents are Mosspelt and Mudstar, mentor is Stagfoot.*

>> Frogpaw; *male, 7 moons, brother is Crowkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot, mentor is Berrystep.*

>> Crowkit; *male, 7 moons, brother is Frogkit, parents are Fawngaze and Stagfoot, currently has no mentor.*

>> Icepaw; *male, 7 moons, father is Gorseface, adoptive mother is Skyleap, mentor is Redflight.*

Elders -

>> Shadeshell; *male, 89 moons, brother of Smokepelt.*

>> Smokepelt; *male, 89 moons, brother of Shadeshell.*

>> Gorseface; *male, 39 moons, son is Icepaw, early retirement because of damaged hind legs.*

HEATCLAN

Leader - >> Cloudstar; *male, 54 moons, mate was Berrystep, mate is Jaypelt, son is Pinebelly, daughters are Sunstorm and Skyleap, mentor to Stripepaw.*

Deputy - > > None

Medicine Cat - > > Marshfoot; *male, 21 moons, brother is Sootsplash, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, mate was Skyleap, daughters are Batkit and Mothkit, son is Antkit.*

Medicine Cat Apprentice - > > Ivypaw; *female, 15 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Reedfang.*

Warriors -

> > Goldheart; *male, 59 moons, mate of Beechpelt, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash.*

> > Beechpelt; *female, 48 moons, mate of Goldheart, sons are Marshfoot and Sootsplash.*

> > Rabbitnose; *female, 47 moons, mate of Mintstep, son is Appletree, daughter is Cherrythorn.*

> > Mintstep; *male, 59 moons, mate of Rabbitnose, son is Appletree, daughter is Cherrythorn.*

> > Bearleap; *male, 60 moons, brother of Briartail, mate is Beeface.*

> > Nettlepelt; *male, 36 moons, mate of Swallowfeather, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

> > Vinepuddle; *male, 52 moons, mentor to Tigerpaw.*

> > Dustfire; *male, 40 moons, mate of Mapleheart, daughter is Breezecatcher, son is Sageheart, mentor to Daisypaw.*

> > Grassflower*; female, 50 moons, daughter is Ashflower, son is Wolfclaw.*

> > Sootsplash; *male, 21 moons, parents are Goldheart and Beechpelt, brother is Marshfoot.*

> > Swallowfeather; *female, 33 moons, mate of Nettlepelt, daughters are Reedfang and Ivypaw.*

> > Riverdew; *male, 61 moons, mate of Clearwhisker, daughter is Magpiefur, brother of Redflight, ex-ColdClan member.*

> > Wolfclaw; *male, 19 moons, mother is Grassflower, sister is Ashflower, mate is Cherrythorn.*

> > Ashflower; *female, 19 moons, mother is Grassflower, brother is Wolfclaw.*

> > Mapleheart*; female, 34 moons, mate of Dustfire, daughter is Breezecatcher, son is Sageheart.*

> > Jaypelt*; female, 46 moons, mate of Cloudstar, son is Pinebelly.*

> > Reedfang; *female, 15 moons, parents are Swallowfeather and Nettlepelt, sister is Ivypaw.*

> > Cherrythorn; *female, 15 moons, parents are Mintstep and Rabbitnose, brother is Appletree, mate is Wolfclaw.*

> > Appletree*; male, 15 moons, parents are Mintstep and Rabbitnose, sister is Cherrythorn.*

> > Pinebelly; *male, 14 moons, parents are Cloudstar and Jaypelt.*

> > Breezecatcher; *female, 13 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, brother is Sageheart.*

> > Sageheart; *male, 13 moons, parents are Dustfire and Mapleheart, sister is Breezecatcher.*

> > Briartail; *female, 59 moons, sister of Bearleap, daughters are Stripepaw and Daisypaw, son is Tigerpaw, mate unknown.*

Queens expecting/nursing kits -

> > Clearwhisker; *female, 58 moons, mate of Riverdew, daughter is Magpiefur, ex-ColdClan member, sons are Ferretkit and Loudkit.*

> > Beeface; *female, 20 moons, father was Coldfrost (deceased) mother was Dovefeather (deceased), mate is Bearleap, expecting kits.*

Kits -

>> Ferretkit; *male, 5 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Loudkit.*

>> Loudkit; *male, 5 moons, mother is Clearwhisker, father is Riverdew, brother is Ferretkit.*

Apprentices

>> Stripepaw; *female, 7 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerpaw, sister is Daisypaw, mentor is Cloudstar.*

>> Daisypaw; *female, 7 moons, mother is Briartail, brother is Tigerpaw, sister is Stripepaw, mentor is Dustfire.*

>> Tigerpaw*; male, 7 moons, mother is Briartail, sisters are Daisypaw and Stripepaw, mentor is Vinepuddle.*

Elders -

Twigjaw; *female, 89 moons, mother of Grassflower.*

ROGUES/LONERS/KITTYPETS

>> Rustfire; *male, 62 moons, ColdClan cat turned kittypet.*

THE SCRAPS CATS

>> Herb; *male, 54 moons.*

>> Invictus; *male, 98 moons.*

>> Trek; *male, 31 moons.*

>> Clementine; *female, 13 moons.*

>> Duncan; *male, 39 moons.*

(c) of the names to me, idea comes from Erin Hunter's work.

This chapter is dedicated to @Tigerstar2 who said their favourite character is Mudstar as he is willing to risk his life for his clanmates. Mudstar is so strong, I love him!

Q&A TIME

I've decided that this chapter's comments will be dedicated to a question and answer session! Got some burning questions about the history of ColdClan? Maybe you want to know who's someone's parents are? Maybe you want to know if I have a favourite character? Perhaps you'd like to ask more about the place they live in? Ask away in the comments! You can ask anything you'd like, but of course, there won't be any spoilers! This is your chance to delve into the author's brain and find out all those little things you've wanted to know.

So fire away! Ask me anything below! I'll reply very quickly as I have notifications on. :)

Author's Note + Plea!

Hello everyone!

I hope you're enjoying this book of the ColdClan series. It's one of my favourite things to write currently and I love seeing how the characters are developing.

I was wondering if you could all give me a massive help by **filling this anonymous form out**.

Some of you may have completed my last form which I believe I published towards the end of the first ColdClan book. This helped MASSIVELY and your feedback was just superb.

This form is super short and will only take a few minutes. It's completely anonymous, too, so you can be as savage as you like!

https://goo.gl/forms/YTVucZFGbdjY06aF2

Click the link above to help an author out. Filling this in will make it easier for me to write further chapters as I can see what you guys like or don't like.

If I get 10+ responses to the forms then I will make a ColdClan companion guide to go alongside the books. How's that for incentive!?

Thank you SO MUCH for reading!!

- Abby a.k.a TLF.

13. Skyleap

Skyleap awoke from a dream plagued with darkness and shadows. Her mind kept reliving the worst memories of the fight between ColdClan and HeatClan -- the yowls of pain, the fear she had felt, the worry that she would not return to her kits... There was no escaping the night and its evils for the young mother.

Thankfully, all the kits had slept soundly beside her. For the first few nights, Icepaw had visited her multiple times throughout the night, partially for her benefit but mostly for his own. The new apprentice had many worries, and Skyleap could do nothing but offer a soothing word to her son. But eventually, she had encouraged him to sleep the night in the apprentice den; she was glad that she had, as the tom was becoming particularly close to Frogpaw, one of the sons of Fawngaze and Stagfoot who was friendly and well-mannered.

Today, Skyleap was feeling much better. Her wounds were almost completely healed and she'd gained much of her energy back. She'd even managed to make her way out of the dark depths of the den and into the warming sun, lying at the edge of the camp as her kits played with Clementine.

It was strange how the Scraps cats had seemingly blended into their lives. The ColdClan cats hardly noticed that they were different anymore, and there'd been several hunting trips which they had been part of. There was something that still set them apart, however. At night, the trio would sleep under the stars as opposed to the warmth of the dens, and no amount of encouragement could convince them otherwise.

Guards around the camp had been upped since the death of Coldfrost. Stagfoot had mainly been in charge of organising such things, with the help of his apprentice, Stonepaw. Skyleap was glad to see that everyone was pulling their weight in clan, and as she watched from the sidelines, she smiled at how effortlessly camp life seemed to move, even in the face of such danger. This was the

courage of the mountain cats.

Catching the sparkling eyes of Mudstar from across the way, the leader ambled up to her, giving her a glance over as he approached.

"Feeling better?" He asked. "You certainly look it."

With a warm smile and a nod, Skyleap sat up a little so as to speak to her leader. "Much better, thank you."

Pausing, Mudstar took a moment to look at her kits, and her own blue eyes followed his gaze. They'd grown so big so quickly, and were beginning to grow into their features -- Batkit had huge ears that had always seemed too goofy for her body, and Antkit had always walked a little strange. But now, when she looked closely, she could see that these features were becoming less distinct and more a part of them.

"Are you ready to return to warrior duty?" Mudstar asked suddenly, his head spinning round to face her once more.

"Huh?" She was utterly confused by what he meant.

"Warrior duty, Skyleap. Your kits are six moons old now, are they not? I'm asking if you want to stay being a queen or return to being a warrior." His face was quizzical, but not in a harsh way. Mudstar always wanted what was best for his clanmates -- they were his friends before all else.

Considering for a moment, Skyleap flicked her tail thoughtfully. She'd always knew this day would come, but so soon? It had jumped upon her like a cat to a mouse.

"I think I'm ready to get back into it." She answered, though hardly convincingly.

With a single nod, Mudstar took off and was on his leader's rock in a matter of seconds.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the leader's rock!"

Skyleap ushered her kits underneath her protectively. As they sat at her feet, Batkit purposefully knocked into Antkit, who fell down onto his chin with an 'oof'. Mothkit gave a disapproving mew.

"Hey!" He squeaked, jumping back to his feet and trying to swipe at her, which she expertly dodged.

"Knock it out!" Skyleap whispered, flicking Batkit with her nose.

"Cats of ColdClan," Mudstar began, a solemn look on his face. "We face hard times. This murderer that tortures us is unlike anything we've ever seen before, but we cannot allow it to win. Though it may feel like we are breaking, we must not; we are mountain cats, we have overcome more than this before! I shall not allow my clan to fall by the paws of some coward!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd, and for a moment, Skyleap felt a burst of hope. This murderer could kill their bodies, but it would never break their spirit.

"Now, onto some more cheerful news. Our clan has grown hugely over the past few moons, and I'm proud to watch the young members grow older and wiser. Firstly, Batkit, Mothkit and Antkit, would you please step up."

Skyleap's kits, clearly shocked, wiggled their small bodies in delight to hear their name. Mothkit led the way, proudly sticking her chin in the air, closely followed by Batkit who kept trying to shove past her sister and Antkit who faltered a little way behind.

Mudstar brought himself down to the kits' level, so that he could speak to them directly.

"Daughters and son of Skyleap, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. May you each keep the courage of your mother and the kindness of Sunstorm at the forefront of your mind when you train."

Skyleap glanced at her sister from the other side of the camp, and whilst the grey she-cat was beaming with pride, Sunstorm's face was completely blank. A little taken aback, Skyleap cocked her head

at her sister, who met her eyes for only one second before turning around and walking back into her den. Skyleap knew her sister had been suffering in the wake of Owlfoot's death, but she hadn't realised it had been this serious. She made a mental note to speak to the ginger she-cat after the ceremony.

Meanwhile, Mothkit took a step forward, eager to be the first one apprenticed.

"Mothkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Mothpaw. Your mentor will be Sootleg. Let him pass down everything he knows."

The sleek tom stepped forward with a huge grin across his face, and touched noses with the she-cat as Mudstar spoke.

It was then Batkit's turn, and Skyleap nearly laughed out loud at how eager the dark apprentice was.

"Young Batkit, you do have endless energy." Mudstar began, and the clan let out a chuckle. It didn't stop the kit from wriggling from side to side out of excitement, however. "From this day on, you will be known as Batpaw. Your mentor will be Webfall -- we'll see if he can knock some energy out of you."

Webfall looked surprise, and Skyleap remembered how he had called her kits half-clan. A bout of worry overcame her, and for a moment she wondered if she should say something to Mudstar. But she knew it was a bad idea; Mudstar knew best, after all.

Batpaw looked absolutely crestfallen at her choice of mentor. No doubt she had been expecting someone like Mudstar, but instead she had gotten the most grumpy cat in the clan. Still, she was becoming an apprentice, and although Skyleap could see she was disappointed, she smiled as her daughter touched noses with Webfall.

Finally, it was Antkit's turn. Mudstar smiled fondly down at the kit, who looked up at him with wide eyes full of admiration. "And finally, Antkit. You shall now be known as Antpaw, and your mentor shall be Sandfall. She is a senior warrior and will teach you

everything you could ever dream of knowing. Congratulations."

The white and orange she-cat smiled warmly at Antpaw, and Skyleap thought to herself what a perfect match they'd be. Sandfall was reserved, but not shy, and she hoped that Antpaw would come out of his shell under her tutelage.

"These aren't the only kits I wish to apprentice today. Milkkit, Minnowkit, would you step up?"

The completely tan kit and her mottled sister stepped up eagerly.

"I know you have recently lost your father." Mudstar said, the clan quietening as they remembered Owlfoot. Magpiefur, who was sat only a short distance from Skyleap, let out a small mew as if she was calling out to her mate." Owlfoot was so inquisitive as a kit, and I hope you two will continue his legacy of curiosity."

Skyleap switched off a little as Mudstar spoke, but managed to catch enough of it to hear that Milkpaw's mentor would be Mudstar and Minnowpaw's mentor would be Lakeheart. It wasn't long after this that the meeting was disbanded, and Skyleap, after congratulating her kits but sending them on their way to meet their new apprentice friends, went to find her sister.

As she entered the medicine cat den, she allowed a moment for her eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness. Pupils wide, she finally could see the ginger pelt of her sister, hidden in the depths of the shadows right at the back of the den.

"Sunstorm?" She spoke gently. Her sister had her back turned to the entrance, and was staring at something on the floor. Stepping towards her quietly, Skyleap tried not to make her sister jump.

Sunstorm didn't respond to Skyleap. Not even when she nudged her sister's cheek. The pair sat in silent for a few heartbeats, and Skyleap studied the ground to find what the other she-cat had been looking at. At her paws lay a feather -- a lark's feather. With a small sigh, Skyleap knew exactly who she was thinking about. Ever since Sunstorm had found this feather only a few days after the death of her mentor, she'd kept it as a good luck charm.

"I let her down." Sunstorm said suddenly, her voice monotone. "I let Larkwing down. And the clan. And Owlfoot..."

Trailing off, the pain on Sunstorm's face was undeniable.

Instantly, Skyleap was in front of her sister with nothing separating them except the feather that was so meaningful to her.

"Don't you ever say that!" Skyleap squeaked loudly, her blue eyes piercing into Sunstorm's golden ones.

Though a little startled by the forcefulness of Skyleap's voice, Sunstorm still looked like her world had crumbled around her.

"Sunstorm." This time, the grey tabby spoke sharply. Perhaps this was the only way to get through to her. "Do you remember when Larkwing was alive? When Dawnstar was our leader? And do you remember how Dawnstar, one of the bravest, strongest cats I will ever know, was attacked by a mountain lion?"

Not meeting her gaze, Sunstorm offered her sister a little nod. She sniffed with sadness at the memories.

"Then you'll remember how devastated Larkwing was when she couldn't save her. How she cried for days, saying that she was unworthy. But then she bounced back. She threw herself into your tutelage, teaching you to be the best medicine cat you could be. And I still remember what you told me, what Larkwing said to you about Dawnstar's death."

"That was different..."

"No!" Skyleap snapped back. "It wasn't different at all! What did Larkwing say, Sunstorm?"

"I can't remember."

"Don't lie! You couldn't stop for weeks about how incredible your mentor was. How did Larkwing respond?"

Pausing for a moment, Sunstorm slowly brought up her eyes to meet Skyleap's. In that moment, she'd never seen her sister look so

much like a kit, and she was reminded of just how young the pair of them were. So much had happened to them, and so much was to happen.

"No one is actually dead till the ripples they cause in the world die away."

Snuggling closer to her sister, she whispered back to her. "Exactly. And we'll never forget Owlfoot. Or Larkwing. Or Dawnstar. Cats may come and go, but the pawprints they leave on our hearts are eternal, Sunstorm."

With a silent nod, her sister buried her head in Skyleap's chest with a single sob.

Skyleap rasped her sister's head. "And hey, we always have StarClan to look forward to, right?"

Dedicated to Pinestorm, who said their favourite character is Clem because she's sure a pure child! <3

14. Sunstorm

The days since Owlfoot's death had been hard and heavy. The dark thoughts clouding Sunstorm's mind were beginning to take their toll.

Berrystep and Skyleap had expressed their worries for her directly, both telling her that they were there if she needed to talk. But she didn't want to talk. What was the point of talking? What she had done was unspeakable. She'd pretty much *murdered* a cat.

Owlfoot. She told herself. *Not just any cat. Your friend. Who you should have been there for.*

It didn't help that Magpiefur, whom had been mates with Owlfoot since they were young warriors, wasn't eating properly. Whenever the black she-cat saw Sunstorm, she couldn't meet her gaze, and the medicine cat was painfully aware of it. And those poor kits of theirs, only just turned six moons... so young to lose their father.

How poignant that she knew how it felt to live fatherless. Except at least her own father was still alive, even if he had betrayed their clan.

The only thing keeping her head above water was Spidertail's unwavering care for her. Every sunup, he would arrive at the medicine cat den entrance to share a mouse (her favourite) with her. Though she didn't eat much of it, just being in his company relaxed her and made her forget about the outside world for a heartbeat. Even when he was supposed to be on dawn patrol, she'd still find him visiting her. No doubt this was frowned upon by Mudstar and Redflight, but both toms knew the pain Sunstorm was feeling, so gave Spidertail a free pass.

Having him there to wake her up every morning stopped her spiralling too far in to the chasm she was desperately grappling the edges of. "Owlfoot's death wasn't your fault." He'd repeat to her

gently, his voice so *sure* of itself. Pressing his tabby head to her ginger, the warmth of the moment was enough to bring anyone back to joy. It was when she was left with her own thoughts which were the hardest moments, where her own mind bullied her into the shadows of oblivion.

Sunstorm hated herself so the rest of the clan didn't have to.

Nonetheless, it was a welcome change having Spidertail by her side. Sunstorm truly considered him one of her best friends and would trust him with her life. It had been funny, actually; the more time she'd spent with Trek, the less she'd seen of Spidertail. That is, except his jealous glances he shot at her whenever her and the red-rosetted Scraps tom spoke to one another. It had really made her feel uncomfortable, so she'd avoided many conversations with Trek.

Yes, of course, if she was a warrior she would perhaps of taken him as a mate. But she wasn't even truly sure he'd like her in that way, and they both were strong followers of the warrior code. They'd stick to it as long as they both had air in their lungs.

Wouldn't they?

As she sat in her den, staring blankly into space, the sound of paws on the dirt outside alerted her to a presence. She didn't turn around, but flicked her ears back to listen.

"It's me. It's Skyleap." The familiar scent of her sister filtered through her nose, but she gave no mew of greeting.

"I'm busy." Sunstorm stated coldly, standing up to move towards her herbs.

The bright silver pelt of her sister bristled up next to her. "Yeah, no you're not."

Ignoring her sister, the medicine cat continued to fumble about with her things. *Poppy seeds, yarrow, lavender...*

"Stop shutting everyone out, Sunstorm. It isn't *healthy*."

Skyleap's pleading fell on deaf ears. The ginger she-cat truly felt

that her mother and sister were better off not worrying about her so much. What if one of them got sick? Or worse, Skyleap's kits? And what if she couldn't save them? No, she would much rather suffer alone -- even though she could feel herself drowning. This mistake she'd made, forgetting to double check Owlfoot for injuries... this was her burden to bear.

Anyway, she had Spidertail. She trusted him more than anyone.

When she didn't get a reply, the snappier side of Skyleap came out. Usually, it would have been a fiery temper that she had been famed for during her apprenticeship -- the one that used to get her into all that trouble. Now, with age, it was her sharp tongue that had flourished. "I never thought I'd see the day where you put a tom over your family. What would Larkwing think?"

The words settled into the room, filling every dark crevice with their tainted meaning, a great swelling of space forming between the sisters; there was no taking it back now. What Skyleap had said so scornfully made Sunstorm feel emotions she'd never felt before. Resentment, anger, sadness, regret... a combination of feelings that could cause her self-destruction.

Before she could explode at her sister, who was simmering in the corner with her own spite, a voice at the entrance made them both look around.

"Skyleap? Sunstorm? Mudstar's looking for you both."

It was Redflight, his ever-friendly gentle face peering at them as though nothing was wrong.

Skyleap was the first to stalk out, not saying another word to Sunstorm, who followed quietly behind, still trembling with anger.

The leader was sat in the corner of camp, quietly speaking with Stagfoot. They looked almost comic next to each other; Mudstar, the lithe, skinny brown tom was smaller than Stagfoot, who towered over him like an oak tree. His name fitted him so well, for he was truly mighty like a stag.

Approaching the small, huddled group, Sunstorm made sure to leave some distance between her and her sister. She wanted to avoid any more confrontation for one day. Redflight gave her an unreadable glance, something he was quite talented at doing. Unsure of how much he had heard of their conversation, she turned away, pretending she hadn't seem his stare.

"Thank you for coming." Mudstar started, his voice as cool and collected as always. "After what happened the other day," he paused to look at Sunstorm. "The clans feel like they're teetering on the edge of war. Honestly, with the prospect of a murderer out there, this is a less than ideal situation."

The group gave nods of approval -- Mudstar spoke the truth.

"Sunstorm, ever the diplomat in everything you do. I need you to use those skills again now. I need you to convince HeatClan that there was never a moment in our history when we need to be more united than these past few days. As the medicine cat, they won't attack you like they did to us. They need to know the truth; we did not kill their deputy, and we haven't killed any of the others who have lost their lives."

Skyleap interrupted, growing impatient. "And why am I here?"

Turning to her, their blue eyes -- one slightly more piercing than the other's -- locking. "Because you're going to be her escort. You saw what happened when we were attacked, you saw the scene of the murder. You are the information behind Sunstorm's words."

Hissing under her breath, Skyleap rolled her eyes. "*You've got to be kidding me*."

Obviously she hadn't said it quietly enough, as Mudstar shot her an arrowhead look. "Problem?"

Shaking her head, the muscular she-cat stood up to leave. Sunstorm did the same, reading her sister's mind; there was no point in waiting if they could go right now.

As the pair said goodbye to the ones who meant the most to them,

the feeling in the camp was one of unrest. When the sisters began the journey down the mountainside, neither spoke to the other, with Skyleap scouting the route ahead.

Not only were the fates of the clans hanging by a thread, but the relationship of the unbreakable sisters was too.

Hi guys!

Sorry I've been MIA. I've really been struggling with muse & writer's block.

Writing this chapter was a reminder to me that ColdClan will forever be my 'heart' story. I've invested so much time in these characters, plotting out their lives, their histories, their futures... It took me a while to remember, but I write these books because it's fun.

The best thing about ColdClan is that even as I get older and drift away from the actual Warriors books by Erin Hunter, I have taken the Erin Hunters' foundations of a world and turned it into my own. Any differences you see in my work and the canon works are, most likely, on purpose. I want my works to be similar enough that people who read them recognise the stories from Warriors but different in the sense that they are exciting and new.

So, I'll bring you ColdClan stories for as long as I can. It always warms my heart when I come back to the world of Sunstorm and Skyleap, and I hope my followers feel it too.

I've missed you all! <3

15. Skyleap

Sisters sharing blood should never spite each other as Skyleap had done. *But*, she thought, *what if that blood had turned to rust?* She gritted her teeth as a lead taste rose into her mouth. Maybe it was a sign from StarClan that in the future, she should keep her thoughts to herself.

They'd only just passed into HeatClan territory, and the journey had felt even longer thanks to the silence that dwelled between her and her sister Sunstorm. Her mind couldn't help but backtrack to the fight they'd had, with the she-cat replaying over and over what she'd said in the heat of the moment.

"I never thought I'd see the day where you put a tom over your family. What would Larkwing think?"

The problem was, Skyleap still believed those words to be true. Larkwing had been so level-headed, there was *no way* the she-cat would have held all these emotions in. Neither would she have wanted her precious apprentice too. Surely Sunstorm remembered her teaching from her mentor? Larkwing had known that keeping the storm bottled inside was a dangerous game, and would only cause her to push those she loved away. Just as Sunstorm had been doing!

Except for some reason, her sister hadn't pushed one cat away -- Spidertail. Yes, the pair had grown up with him and his brothers. Yes, she knew Spidertail cared for Sunstorm (it became more and more obvious each day). But there was always something about him, something she couldn't quite put her paw on... were his friendly intentions really so pure?

Anyway, if he hurt Sunstorm, she'd kill him herself.

The sudden presence of cats that she'd missed the scent of knocked her back into reality, and she instinctively closed the gap between

her and Sunstorm. She recognised all three of the cats that approached -- there was the huge Bearleap, the green-eyed Vinepuddle and the young Reedfang (a ferocious, ambitious she-cat that Skyleap recognised some of her own qualities in). Skyleap's eyes settled angrily on Vinepuddle, for he had been the one to initiate the attack against ColdClan. His baseless claims had been the thing to kill Owlfoot... not her sister.

Surprisingly, it was the latter that spoke, though the first sentence seemed difficult for the she-cat to say though her voice was nonetheless commanding.

"We're... glad you're here. Cloudstar awaits you. Please, follow us."

The two large toms filtered in behind them as Reedfang led the way, her lithe body moving quickly through the dunes to HeatClan's sheltered camp. Sharing a confused look, the sisters moved in silence. Why were they not sending flying accusations like they had done at Coldfrost's murder scene? Why were they being welcomed as if they were... guests?

Shown straight to the leader's den, the pair were left alone by the warriors. As they wandered deeper into the hole dug specifically for their father, a familiar black and white pelt was facing away from them.

"Cloudstar?" Skyleap called out.

He said nothing, not even turning around. Confused, the she-cats moved a little closer. There was no way he hadn't heard her, they'd seen his ears twitch towards them.

"Cloudstar, we came to tell you that--"

"He's gone. Last night."

His coarse voice ricocheted across those dirt walls, resounding in the hearts of his daughters. They were slightly afraid of the tone he used. It sounded so cold, so unforgiving.

"Who's gone, father?" It had been a long time since she'd heard her sister call him that, and Skyleap shot her a glance.

Rounding to face them, they were shocked by the Cloudstar that stared back. His fur was matted and dirty, as if it hadn't been washed in a while. Tufts of it were missing, mainly from his legs, where Skyleap could only guess he'd been clawing at them from nerves. And more than anything, the most shocking thing were his eyes. Dull and sunken with no life in, the golden orbs had turned a dirty yellow and were manically flickering about like he'd gone insane.

Both sisters stared with mouths wide-open, taken aback by the horror that was their father.

Behind them, a deeper voice offered an explanation. "Pinebelly. Pinebelly was taken."

Black and white fur, but with more white than black. Huge. Muscled. Eyes just like those of the tom she'd once loved...

Sootsplash!

Offering him a warm, familiar smile (of which he returned, if only for a heartbeat), the grey she-cat looked at her father, then the tom. She had to absorb what he'd said for a moment. Pinebelly... Cloudstar's son? A cat she shared blood with... she couldn't stay on that thought for very long.

"By the murderer?" Sunstorm asked, staying on topic.

Nodding, Sootsplash settled down with his tail wrapped neatly around him. His eyes didn't waver off his leader.

"We can only guess. We haven't found a body yet, but... I believe it'll only be a matter of time, if we look at the pattern."

For a moment, Skyleap had to absorb what had been said.

"Cloudstar had to name a deputy after Coldfrost's death. He chose me. I wish it could have been in better circumstances."

Raising an eyebrow, Skyleap studied the tom for a second. He was young -- very young -- to be a deputy. She wondered that perhaps her father, in his... insanity, had chosen the wrong cat. But then she

remembered back to all the times he'd helped her, all the times he'd been level-headed and confident in his abilities. Perhaps this was the most sane choice her father had ever had.

"Congratulations," Sunstorm said politely. "Sootsplash, could we speak to you outside?"

Cloudstar didn't seem to even notice the three of them leave the den. They made their way to the edge of the camp, sitting under the shade of a thick gorse bush.

It was clear Sunstorm's medicine cat instincts had kicked in, as she gazed back towards the leader's den.

The tom was the one to speak first. "I know. He's in a bad way. I know what he did to you both, but trust me, that tom loves all of his kits. If something has happened to Pinebelly, it will break him. It'd be the same for you two."

Gritting her teeth, Skyleap hid her grimace from the others. She wasn't so sure her father would respond the same way.

"I've never seen him like this..." Sunstorm replied, shaking her head. "Is he eating?"

Shaking his head, Sootsplash met both of them dead in the eye in turn, his face full of worry. "This whole murderer thing is breaking him. I truly don't know how much more pain and grief he can cope with."

An interruption came from, surprisingly, a kit. None of them had seen it coming, tumbling towards them over it's tiny paws. In comic fashion it stood up, sneezed, and then stared up at the older cats thoughtfully. He didn't seem to realise that he'd stumbled in on an important conversation.

"Ferretkit," Sootsplash began lovingly, the warmth in his tone catching Skyleap by surprise. "Why aren't you with your mother? I bet she's worried sick."

With a tiny mew, the tiny cat plonked himself down, tilting his head as he did so. His body was that of a brown tabby -- long, but

very fluffy, especially in his ears.

"Mama said I could play at the front of the den..." He trailed off as he looked behind him, realising that where he was supposed to be was a good few fox-lengths away. Skyleap smiled gently.

"Looks like you've wandered a little further than you intended, huh?" She said, coming down to his level.

Turning to run back to where he was supposed to be, Ferretkit was about to run off, when he had a change of heart. Striding up to Sootsplash, he peered up at him once more, looking very serious.

"Sootsplash. I have a question."

The tom looked at him for a heartbeat, but flicked his tail a little impatiently. "Ferretkit, I've got plenty of time for questions later, but I really need to speak to these ColdClan cats now, ok?"

Wiggling his body, the tiny tom let out a huff of disappointment. Skyleap and Sunstorm chuckled; if anyone could cheer them up, it was a kit.

"Ok, Sootsplash, ok. I'm going, I'm going!"

"Good." He replied. "Now, where were we?"

"Hopefully Pinebelly will come back soon from playing with that stranger cat and play with me instead!"

Mouths dropping open and frowns forming on their faces, the adult cats were stunned into silence. How did the kit know that Pinebelly had disappeared?

"Wait!" Skyleap called out. "Come back a second!"

Confused, the tabby tom wandered back over. "Did you change your mind? Do you want to play?"

Shaking her head, Skyleap once again bent down to his height. "When did you see Pinebelly, Ferretkit?"

Scratching with his hind leg thoughtfully, Ferretkit paused to think. "Umm, yesterday night. I sneaked out of the den to go explor-- oh, you're not supposed to know that... Please don't tell my mama."

All three cats instantly shook their heads. "No, no, we promise we won't tell anyone Ferretkit, but it's super important you tell us what you saw."

"I saw Pinebelly! He didn't look very well. Someone was dragging him along. Maybe to the medicine den? I should check there, see if he wants to play when he's better!"

Sootsplash instantly picked him up by the scruff of his neck. Sunstorm and Skyleap were already on their feet, rushing alongside Sootsplash towards the leader's den.

As they ran, the gravity of the situation sank in and pulled them straight back down to reality as it did so. The murderer may have struck again, but they'd make a mistake -- they'd finally been seen!

---

omg i love to leave you guys on a cliff hanger hahahaha

wow, holy moly, the murderer has finally been seen!

unfortunately by a not-so-reliable witness, little Ferretkit.

will he be able to give them enough details to discover who it is before they kill again?

who IS the murderer? comment below who you think for the chance of a chapter dedication!

16. Sunstorm

[image]

"You're joking..."

Those two words truly summed up the mood of the cats. Nobody could quite believe that their first true lead was a *kit*. It was Mudstar who spoke them, eyes wide and mouth hanging slightly open. Sunstorm had never seen him so shocked.

Sitting only a fox-length away, she watched as her leader paced back and forth in his den. Her and Skyleap had raced back home, leaving Sootsplash to deal with Cloudstar's reaction. When she'd told the brown tom, he hadn't believe her at all.

Both clans had agreed to an emergency gathering, where Ferretkit would give a testimony over what he'd seen. Sunstorm was a little worried that the kit would be too afraid to speak in front of everyone, or that his young brain had gotten confused and he hadn't seen Pinebelly at all. Either way, there was no doubt that this was all they had to go on. Everyone's fears were heightened; nobody knew when the killer would strike again.

"Ok, Sunstorm, we need to decide who's going to the gathering."

"I'm terrified the murderer will strike whilst we're away, Mudstar." She admited. "There are so many vulnerable cats who we'll have to leave behind..."

Mudstar gave a small mew of agreement, before tilting his head.

"So we leave Redflight behind, along with Stagfoot and maybe Spidertail? They'll be best at protecting the remaining cats."

"Ok. And we should leave all the apprentices. They're quick and small, and could run to us and get help quick if need be."

"Do you think Fishpaw will be okay on her own, in case a cat gets sick or... or the murderer hurts someone?" Mudstar asked, faltering over his last few words.

"She'll be fine. She's been doing great recently!" Sunstorm was full of pride over her apprentice, who was a talented medicine cat already.

"Then that's that. We'll take only a very select few. I'm sure HeatClan will do the same. This isn't a formal gathering, after all."

Taking a step forward, Mudstar pressed his nose to Sunstorm warmly.

"This is it." He stated, his voice low. "This is how we find the pond-scum who is doing this. Don't tell anyone what you and Skyleap know. We don't want gossip spreading. Cats need to hear it from Ferretkit himself."

With a firm nod, Sunstorm turned out of the den and darkening afternoon. The sun was beginning to dip behind the mountain and the last rays of light filtered low through the trees. Camp was quiet, but not in the gentle kind of way that usually filled ColdClan -- it was quiet in fear, with the not knowing of who was friend and who was foe. Even the kits, who had been sheltered from the truth, seemed to be able to tell something was wrong. Instead of their usual, playful selves, they kept to themselves or close to their mothers. Skyleap's kits especially, who were the most boisterous and crazy of them all, hung around their mother more as the eerie silence had descended on the clan.

From across the way, Sunstorm noticed Spidertail sat by himself. He was staring up at a crow in the heights of a tree -- not moving, but simply watching. Cautiously, she picked her way across the clan's clearing to only a fox-length behind.

"Think it's a sign from StarClan?" Spidertail joked; he had heard her coming.

Sitting down just a short way behind him and wrapping her tail neatly around her ginger body, Sunstorm gave a small laugh. "I

wish. Haven't had one of them in a while, to be honest."

"Hardly surprising. They like to abandon us in times like these." She knew he was making reference to the mountain lions who had plagued their clan until not too long ago. Turning around to face her, he looked into her eyes. "Hey, I heard whispers there's an emergency gathering. What's going on?"

"Word travels quickly in this clan..." Sunstorm trailed off. "Nevermind. Look, I can't tell you the details but... it's to do with the murders."

Spidertail frowned. "Well, what about the murders? Do they know who it is? You can trust me, Sunstorm. Tell me."

"I really can't say, Spidertail, I promised Mudstar..."

"I get it." He interrupted, suddenly getting up to walk away. "I thought we were close, Sunstorm. I thought we agreed to be there for each other. I'm trying to *help* you here."

Taken aback by the brash response from her friend, Sunstorm was still as she absorbed the shock and pain of his words. "Wait!" She called out after him, but he didn't turn around and disappeared into the thick gorse. Sunstorm stared into the darkness, with a heavy feeling of confusion and hurt descending over her. That hadn't been the Spidertail she knew at all.

There was little time to mull over it, however, as Mudstar appeared with a few cats he'd selected to join them. The group was watched from the sidelines of the clan by Herb, Trek and Clementine; Sunstorm felt sorry for them. They had been brought in to help protect the clan, but she was sure they'd be missing their homes by now, no matter how good they were sat being clan cats. Clementine especially was good with the kits. Herb was a good hunter and brought back lots of food for the fresh kill pile. And Trek... was Trek. He was a friend now. Still feeling the rebuff from Spidertail, Sunstorm caught the gaze of the Bengal tom and offered him a warm smile. Yes, he was certainly growing on her. As were all the Scraps cats.

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It didn't take long at all to reach the StarCave where the gathering was being held. Sunstorm had taken the time to explain to the Scraps cats the difference between the StarCave and MoonCave: the former was where the cats sat upon stalagmites with rounded tops and debated between each other under the watchful eyes of the stars, whereas the latter was for the medicine cats and housed the MoonStone. Sunstorm and Skyleap had had a terrifying experience there, and they hadn't spoken about it since. They simply couldn't. She hadn't mentioned that part to the Scraps cats.

When they arrived, the sky was speckled with the first stars in the glowing pale blue dusk. Fireflies had danced around the entrance to the cave, welcoming the ColdClan cats. There was never a moment that Sunstorm felt more connected to her ancestors than when she stared upwards into the night sky. Did the stars gaze back too?

Mudstar had selected only a pawful of cats. These were, of course, Mudstar and Skyleap, but then Sandfall, Webfall, Mosspelt, Rowanwhisker, Fawngaze and Creekwillow joined them. Spidertail had not been invited. He would have to hear what the kit was about to say second-hand.

The cats that had been brought had no idea what they were about to hear, only that it was essential that they come and that it was regarding the murders.

Cloudstar, still looking ragged and desperate but with a newfound hope in his eyes, greeted Mudstar with greetings whispered in exchange, quietly enough for the other cats to not hear what was said. There was a general murmuring around the two clans as they mingled with each other, but it was clear this was unlike a normal gathering as there was a dark feeling lingering among the pleasantries. It was easy to be suspicious of your neighbour.

"Cats of both clans!" Cloudstar let out a yowl to get the attention of everyone present. Sunstorm glanced around the HeatClan cats from her place at the base of the stalagmite that Mudstar sat upon. Sootsplash wasn't there, but that was to be expected. In the crowd, she could see Ferretkit with his mother, Clearwhisker, who

protectively stood over her son occasionally licking his head. Whilst Clearwhisker looked anxious, Ferretkit looked excited, and couldn't stop looking around at the StarCave or those in it.

"We are gathered under the gleaming eyes of our ancestors tonight for an emergency gathering. My son, Pinebelly, has been... taken. We can only assume that it is by the cat who has been committing the murders."

Mudstar nodded along, picking up from where his HeatClan counterpart left off. "Sunstorm and Skyleap, on their mission to report the news of our Owlfoot's death to HeatClan, were surprised to be told this information by Cloudstar."

The clans mumbled under their breath, wondering where this was going. Cloudstar flicked his tail slightly aggressively to regain their attention.

"On the night Pinebelly disappeared, Ferretkit of HeatClan saw what happened. He will now come up here and tell you all himself."

Sunstorm hadn't quite agreed that putting a small kit before lots of older cats was a good idea, but it hadn't seemed to faze the young cat at all. He was nudged up onto a rock just below the leaders, helped by his mother who sat close but was listening intently.

With a gentle purr, Mudstar bent down and mewed to the kit. "Tell us everything you saw about Pinebelly, Ferretkit."

"Hmm..." The small kit pondered for a second. "Well, Pinebelly always plays with me. He's super fun and we play a game called stones..." He caught himself before he went off on a tangent; he'd been told by his mother to stay on track. "Me and Pinebelly had played early, but I'd left my favourite stone outside when it was bedtime, and I also wanted to explore but I knew mama wouldn't be happy so I just grabbed the stone and went to bed! I promise mama." He said the last bit directly to Clearwhisker, who smiled up at him and nodded.

"And what did you *see*, Ferretkit?" Cloudstar said earnestly.

"Oh," the kit began again, his tail whipping from side to side. "Pinebelly was asleep, I think. Or sick! But he was being dragged by a muscly cat who I didn't recognise in the dark. When they were in a little patch of moonlight I could see the pattern of their coat! It was so pretty."

Another lead -- a coat colour. All of the cats held their breath.

"What colour was it, Ferretkit?" Asked Mudstar.

"Mama told me about tigers once. She said we were descended from them, and they were a bright orange colour! But she said they have black stripes. The cat didn't have stripes. They had spots. Big black spots on an orange pelt. It was so glow-y too!"

There were a few shouts from ColdClan cats at Mudstar, though what they were actually saying was just a jumble of words in Sunstorm's brain. All she could picture was that bright, beautiful pelt. There was only one cat she knew with a colouring so distinct.

Trek.

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well, i hope you enjoyed this chapter!!

have we *finally* discovered who the murderer is? or is the witness too unreliable to be believed?

This chapter is dedicated to @EmeraldFrost0529, who commented saying they believed the murderer to be Larkwing's daughter! React to this sentence if you've been a fan since book one and can remember this being mentioned!

take a peek below at something i made at the top of this -- my first ever pixel cat, and of course it had to be skyleap (although she's a little dark, her pelt is supposed to be silver more than grey!). follow my deviantArt (karmbutt) for more pixels!

don't forget to like this chapter, and follow me for future updates!

17. Skyleap

Anger had fuelled Skyleap on the way home from the gathering. Like a grey blur she'd frantically raced over fallen trees and boulders to get back to camp. The only thing her mind could think about was the Scraps cats, and how much she wanted to *rip them apart* like they'd done to her family and friends.

"Murderers, murderers, murderers..."

So had been the chant after Ferretkit's testimony, and Mudstar's embarrassing confession of letting the Scraps cats into ColdClan's camp.

Her sister had pleaded on their behalf, the traitor that she was. *"It doesn't make sense,"* she'd said. *"There were murders before they even arrived!"*

But nobody has listened, and the ginger she-cat had been drowned out by the woeful cries, calling for the Scraps cats to be brought to justice -- Skyleap herself had been at the front of the frenzied mob, screaming her pleads upwards to the leaders asking for the chance to bring them their deaths.

And now, here she was, on her way to deliver StarClan's punishment. Unfortunately, she had not been permitted to kill them instantly. There were concerns from many senior cats that there was an insider involved, and the decision had been made to speak to each cat individually to try and draw out information about any traitors. She imagined that Clementine would be the first to crack.

Clementine...

So the sweet apricot-coated cat wasn't so innocent after all, hmm? Skyleap would never have guessed. She had trusted her precious

kits with that monster! No, she would be the first to be interrogated. Skyleap was planning it all out in her head as she moved, as lithe and fast as a shooting star, approaching camp at lightning speed.

As she tumbled into camp, there was a placid sensation that loitered, with many cats clearly already asleep (though most had stayed up to greet the incoming gathering invitees). Dust flew up around her in a small cloud, drifting away into the darkness as her head whipped from side to side in an attempt to seek out the Scraps cats. Mudstar, who had not been too far behind her, rolled into camp at the same moment she spotted them.

Crouched in a corner murmuring among themselves, the three cats looked up only when Skyleap approached, each of them offering her a warm look. They must have been rather surprised when Skyleap flung herself at Trek (who was much larger than she was) and battered him to the floor.

"Hey! Stop it!" He called out, trying not to hit her back as she swiped at his face. Mudstar stood behind her with a glare, and slowly, a mixture of gathering cats and cats who had stayed at camp came over to watch the commotion. Whispering to each other, it quickly became clear to the uniformed what was happening.

In a flash, Spidertail was at her side, his mottled pelt barely visible in the darkness. He hissed towards Herb and Clementine, who backed away in confusion.

"What's happened?" Herb said calmly, putting himself between the ColdClan warrior and little Clementine, who had never looked so scared.

Keeping her prisoner pinned down, Skyleap stopped for a moment to turn her attention to the Scraps' leader. "You've been found out," she grunted. "We know your dirty little secret. You *murderers*."

The clan seemed to come alive at the word, and the yowls and pain shook Skyleap to her bones. The feeling in their voices was unparalleled, and all Skyleap wanted to do was make it better for

them.

It was Mudstar who took control of the situation, as ever. "Webfall -- prepare the old mountain lion cave. Get Rowanwhisker to help you find some branches to use".

Quickly becoming clear to Skyleap what Mudstar wanted to do, she released her grip on Trek, who leapt into the air with a shocked huff. Steadily the clan encircled them, until there was no escape on any corner. They had their murderers.

In the corner of camp sat Sunstorm, shocked at the brutal witch-hunt she was witnessing. Her clan was so desperate for revenge, they had forgotten that the idea that the Scraps cats could be the murderers hardly made *sense*. But Skyleap did not look up, nor did she seek out her sister's opinion. This was Skyleap in her true self: dedicated to the truth, pinpointed like a bullet throttling towards its target, and always prepared to kill.

Within the hour, the makeshift prison was made, and a few key warriors brought the Scraps cats up to the cave. It was agreed that there would be shifts in pairs so that in an emergency, there would always be a cat left to guard the murderers. Skyleap offered to take the first shift, but she was shutdown by Redflight who had quietly worried to himself about the warpath his old apprentice was on, and suggested she rest.

That night, her kits didn't sleep in the apprentice den, but instead at her side as though they were a few moons old again. A strange warmth swelled inside of her; it was a mix of gladness that perhaps they could move on from the violence and bloodshed, but also a feeling of protection for her litter, knowing that it could have been them killed.

"Skyleap?" Icepaw murmured, wriggling closer towards his adoptive mother's face so she could see him in the dark.

The she-cat bent her head, swimmingly-blue eyes bright like a crystal in a cave. "Yes Icepaw?"

"Do you *really* think that the Scraps cats are the murderers?"

Holding her tongue from launching into a tirade about how obvious it was that they were, the warrior instead looked away and tried to temper her fiery anger.

"It's just, Sunstorm doesn't seem to think so..." Icepaw added, looking up at her with his big eyes.

"Sunstorm needs to learn to tame that soft heart of hers!"

Rolling into his mother's chest, Icepaw didn't say anything else, knowing that pushing the vexed cat any further could end badly for him.

As Icepaw drifted off, Skyleap found herself more awake than ever, thoughts running through her mind. Something was niggling at her, trying to shake her awake every time her eyes closed.

Had she really gotten the right cats?

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With the dawn chorus singing its cheerful song, a bleary-eyed Skyleap awoke to an empty den. She tried to savour the moment of sleepy bliss, that few seconds before the memories of the past few days come flooding back, but it was no use. No sooner than she had opened her eyes, she was brought right up to speed with the happenings.

Camp was busy that morning, and she frowned as she scanned the faces for her sister, quickly coming up empty. Spidertail sat nearby, aggressively devouring a sparrow, and she wandered over to him.

"Have you seen Sunstorm?" She asked, still looking around as she did so.

Taking a moment to swallow what he was chewing, Spidertail shook his head. "Nope, sorry Skyleap. I think she's gone out somewhere. I guess it's safer, now those *brutes* have been caught."

Skyleap made some sort of noise in agreement that seemed to satisfy Spidertail. Pausing to consider where her sister could be, she realised that there was only one place she'd creep off alone.

"Do you think she's with the prisoners?" Questioned Skyleap to Spidertail.

"No idea. But I'll come with you and find out."

The pair moved swiftly up the side of the mountain, the trees becoming more sparse the further they went. It was not far at all to the make-shift prison, and they arrived just in time to see Sunstorm stood speaking through the gaps in the branches lining the cave mouth. The only other cat present was Stagfoot, stood slightly away watching the cats converse.

Rage began to burn in Skyleap, and it was apparent that Spidertail felt it too, as he let out a hiss in Sunstorm's direction. The ginger she-cat paused speaking, spinning around alarmed by her approaching clanmates. She shuffled awkwardly, and whoever she had been speaking to in the prison backed away further into the darkness.

"Sunstorm!" Skyleap screamed at her sister, whilst Spidertail launched forward at full speed. The grey warrior followed in his footsteps.

Ignoring Sunstorm, Spidertail raced up to the bars, getting as close as possible. Before they knew it, he had spat in the face of the cat who happened to have been talking to Sunstorm -- Herb.

With a yowl, the black cat threw himself at the bars of his cavernous cage, unsheathed claws attempting to scratch Spidertail, though the cat easily leapt backwards to avoid the flashing paws. Whilst the tom looked disgustedly at the prisoners, Skyleap rounded on her sister, squaring up with her aggressively.

"What do you think you're doing!?" She stared her sister down.

Sunstorm, who was no match for the physical power her sister had spent many moons honing, cowered in fear. "I just thought I could talk to them, find out why they would do such a thing..." She trailed off, but attempted to match her sister's gaze with pleading eyes. "*Why* would they do this Skyleap?"

"As if I care," she snorted in response, tossing her head arrogantly. "They deserve nothing, Sunstorm. Stop wasting your time on them!"

"Please, Skyleap, I just don't think--"

"Enough! Sunstorm, I forbid you from coming up here!" Skyleap wasn't even sure she had the power to do that, and she knew that Sunstorm was more respected in clan than she was, but she was not about to let her sister get caught up with these villainous cats. Her sister may have been fooled by their act, but Skyleap could see straight through them.

A noise from behind them caught Skyleap's attention -- someone calling her name -- and she turned to see Robinpaw approaching.

Panting a little from running so fast, the tom wheezed out his words. "Skyleap..." he breathed heavily. "Pinebelly's body... it's been found..."

The cats in the cave came to the opening with horrified looks in their eyes. Clementine let out a desperate mew.

Robinpaw carried on. "He was on ColdClan territory, too."

The grey she-cat shot her sister a look, as if that was all the proof they needed that the Scraps cats were guilty.

There would be no more death now, Skyleap told herself. *She would bring justice.*

Heh. Hello all.

Enjoy the update!

Author's Goodbye

Hi ColdClan fans -- the one's of you that are still around!

As many of you know, I haven't updated this work since 2020. I'm really sorry about this. I can only apologise for my inactivity.

I'm on here to disappoint you even more. Unfortunately, I just have not got the time to finish the ColdClan series. I love it with all my heart, but I started it back in 2015, so you have to understand, a lot has changed since then! That's 8 years ago now, which sounds crazy to think about. Back then, I was still a kid really. I had the time and the mental energy to write. But, as I'm sure is the way with a lot of people, real life has hit me hard. ColdClan feels like a lifetime ago.

I know a lot of you will be upset by this, as I am getting comments even in 2023 asking for me to finish the work. I am really sorry to let you down.

I'd like to reveal the murderer for all those who want to know. As I'm older now, I don't like the ending -- it doesn't make sense. But young Bee thought it was the best thing in the world. So, anyway, here it is:

I planned on Trek having a twin sister who he was separated from at birth. Whilst they both grew up as street cats, Trek's sister chose a dark path, and became a trained assassin. Her name was Medea, and she was "paid" by Coldfrost to kill the people Skyleap and Sunstorm loved best after they killed his partner in the previous book. Below is what I had on my storyboard, for a bit more info.

"Sunstorm speaks to Trek at night after getting Fishpaw to help her distract the guards. Trek promises that it isn't him who is the murderer, and that she has to save them from their fate. He explains about his sister, who was a killer for hire. He doesn't know if it

could be her but it is possible, and so asks Sunstorm to investigate.

Skyleap is convinced by Sunstorm to protect her as they search for the so-called Medea. They try and set a trap but no cat arrives. Just as they're giving up hope, they find Spidertail in the woods alone. He tells them he is checking the borders now the murderer has been imprisoned, but Sunstorm believes he is acting strangely. The next night, they follow him into the woods, where he meets with a cat that looks just like Trek -- Medea. Medea and Spidertail's meeting is heated. She is saying that they only have one cat left to kill to get to where they want to be. Spidertail tells Medea that Sun/Sky are getting suspicious of him, and reminds her that everything he has done has been for Sunstorm. He says he wants out, and Medea reminds him how Sunstorm will need him more than ever with the final kill.

Medea admits that the "fox-brained" Coldfrost was involved too and "had to die" because he wouldn't let Medea get her way in the end.Medea also suggests that Spidertail should encourage the deaths of the Scraps cats to make them think its all over and relax, making it easier for her. When the two cats leave, Sunstorm almost falls out of the tree in shock/crying. They try and make sense of what they've heard. Spidertail covered the scent of Medea with his own. He was in love with Sunstorm."

And that's as far as I got!

The sad thing is, I had planned ColdClan to be a massive series. I'd built such good stories with these characters that I never wanted to leave them. I planned on having a third book in the series following Skyleap and Sunstorm, where they figure out how to be accepted back into StarClan (if you remember, they were locked out!)

I also planned on having four works based on Skyleap's kits. These were going to be called *The Misgivings of Batflight*, *The Courage of Antblaze*, *The Heart of Mothwatcher*, and *The Wanderings of Icebreeze*. I'm disappointed I can't explore their stories. They had a lot of potential.

I hope you know how sorry I am for ending the journey here. I want to write again, I really do. But I don't have the time nor the energy, and if I were to do so, I'd like it to be something I created, not building off someone else's idea.

Please know I will always love this series. I appreciate the support I still get for it. I hope you will go in your journey taking with you the bravery and stoic nature of Skyleap, and the softness of Sunstorm.

- Bee